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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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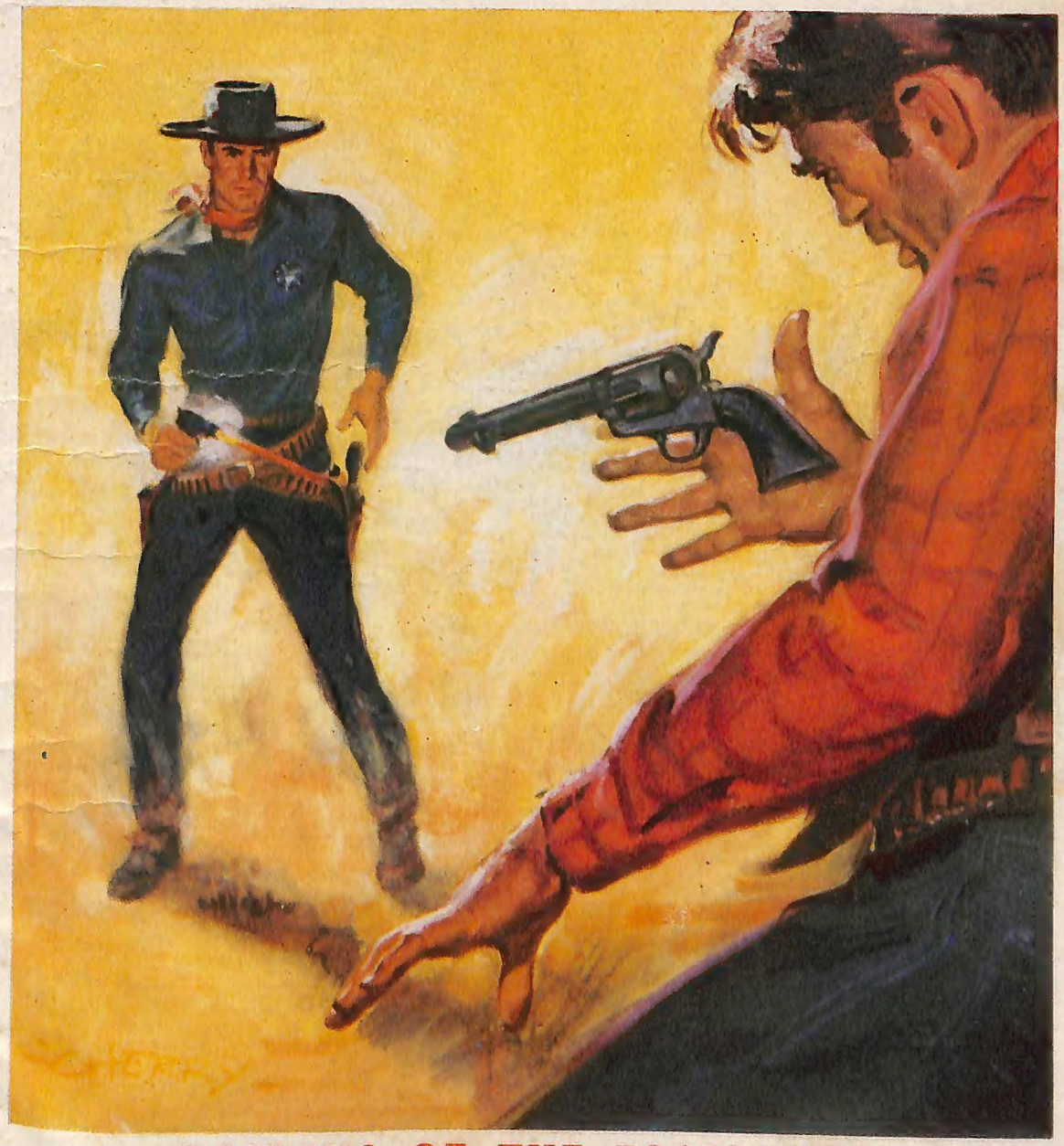

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A JIM HATFIELD ACTION NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

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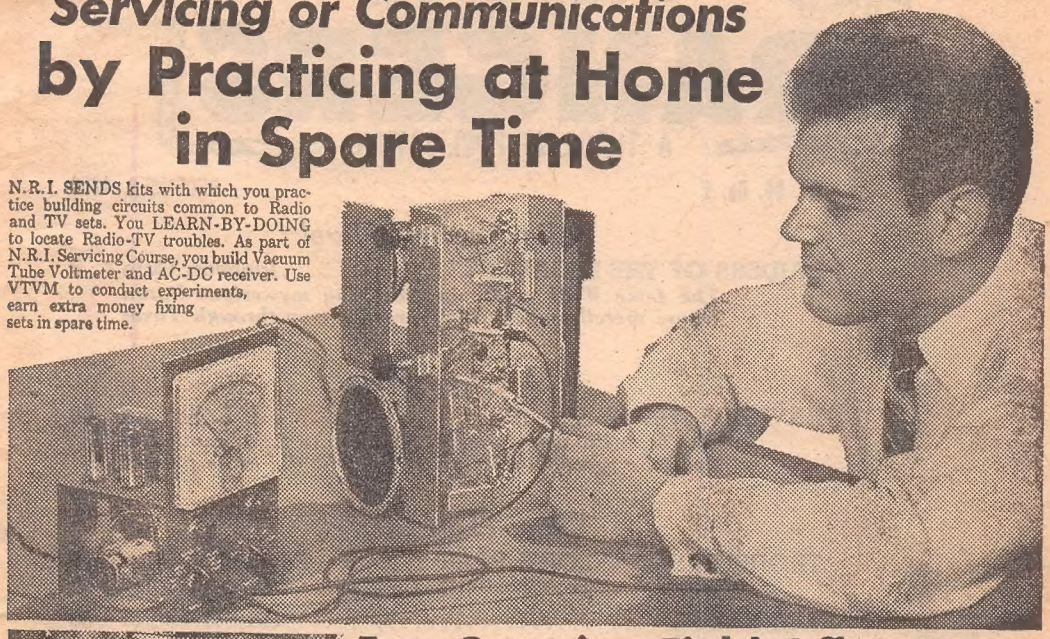

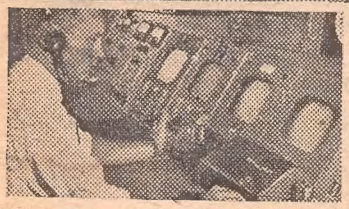

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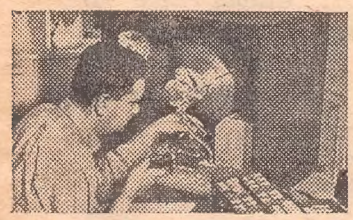

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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 65, No. 1 DECEMBER, 1956

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

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The First American Bullfight

DODGE CITY was becoming so confounded civilized around the spring of 1884 that some of the oldtimers, longing for the rip-snortin' days which had made the town famous as the wickedest little city on the continent, decided to liven up the place by staging something that, to their knowledge, had never before been tried on American soil—a bullfight!

A. B. Webster, a former mayor, was the guiding hand behind the idea. He proposed the fight to be held on July 4, using local bulls and matadors imported from Mexico. He received plenty of backing from nostalgic-minded Dodgers, as well as $10,000 for promotional purposes.

Dodge City once again splashed across the front pages of every newspaper in the country, and editors didn't overlook the chance to state that Dodge City and its lurid past seemed about to break out all over the Kansas landscape again.

The SPCA tried to stop the fight, on the grounds that Kansas law forbade such practices, and Webster claimed to have received a telegram from the U.S. Attorney to the effect that bullfighting was against the law in the U.S., to which he was supposed to have replied: "Hell! Dodge City ain't in the United States!"

Everyone for miles around came, and newspaper correspondents from the big metropolitan dailies were given choice seats. About one third of the audience were women and children, with the local sheriff having the unpleasant task of trying to keep the local dance hall girls separated from the more respectable women.

There were five fights scheduled, and the crowd was roaring for action when the first bull charged into the arena. He was a huge red bull, as fierce-looking as anything the crowd could have hoped for. Captain Gregoria Gallardo was chosen to fight him. The fight fulfilled all expectations of the audience.

The bull was ferocious, the matadors and picadors were in fine fettle, and given every opportunity to display their skill. By the end of half an hour the bull was thoroughly frazzled, and his back sported streamers from massive head to drooping tail. He was finally roped and dragged from the arena.

The other four bulls proved to be more interested in getting out of the arena as fast as possible, and flatly refused to act like anything but Ferdinand. They were hopeless failures, and the crowd was getting wilder by the minute, demanding their money's worth. It had been advertised that Gallardo would personally kill the last bull, but there didn't seem to be any last bull to kill.

After a hurried conference, the big red bull was returned to the arena, raring to go again. This time he held the upper hand over Gallardo for some time. He got Gallardo down and would have gored him, but he had fallen between the horns and wriggled free, then escaped into a protective chute. Gallardo attacked again, however, and after several minutes was able to shove the steel blade home, thus ending the first bullfight on American soil.

The promoters had promised two days of fighting, and the second day was much the same as the first. The bull which was killed at the last, however, refused to remain dead. His carcass was dragged from the arena onto the prairie, to be disposed of the next day. But when the owner came back for the body it wasn't there. A few days later he reported the bull back with his herd, apparently no worse for wear.

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Raiders of the

The Lone Wolf must pin down the mysterious Baron who swept like an ill wind out of the Escalante, killing, robbing, then disappearing again

CHAPTER I

Out of the Desert

BOB CRANE came out of the desert riding a frothy-mouthed bay mare. He came into Dry Gulch with a thin sliver of moon shining murkily over his shoulder and death stalking hard at his heels.

He hesitated a moment before wheeling the mare down the old goat trail and across the arroyo which made a natural separation between desert and town

Escalante

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

and pulled to a halt before the narrow-fronted adobe law office.

The town marshal's shack was dark which indicated that Tom Benton was out making his rounds. Disappointment rode a hard spur through Crane—he turned and tossed an uneasy glance behind him.

The Escalante merged into the murky darkness. A hot dry wind, thick with sand, lifted from the far reaches of this mysterious land and rolled like a ground fog toward town. The grit stung Crane's thin, bony face.

He was being followed!

He felt it move in the darkness beyond the arroyo and fear pinched his mouth. He was a lanky man, sallow-cheeked, sober-eyed, stopped of shoulder. He didn't look the part of a detective, and he had been careful to foster this appearance. In Dry Gulch he was known as a tenderfoot Easterner who had come West for his health. A man who washed dishes and did the chores in the El Dorado Hotel and amused himself and the hotel's dining room guests by scribbling humorous or romantic verse on menu cards.

He had played his role well, but it had finally caught up with him. He knew he had little time left—too little to get word back to his office. His only hope lay with Marshal Tom Benton . . .

He rode the mare in close to the law office and the open side window caught his attention, shaping his next move. Instinctively he cast another glance into the desert. He saw nothing move, but he wasn't reassured—he had blundered this last time out and he knew he had been followed.

He reached in his boot for the knife he carried there. A note he had written and tied around the bone handle rustled under his fingers. He had arranged for just such an emergency, and now it was on him. He flipped the knife through the open window, hearing it hit and slide across the wooden planks. Then he kneed the tired mare away from the law office and headed for the main part of town.

The rising wind whirled sand after him. He rode down Dry Gulch's Main Street and it was like riding into a ghost town. Most of the shops had wooden shutters closed against the wind off the Escalante and only occasionally did a weak lamplight probe the murky night.

He turned into the livery stable a block from the hotel and having reached this far the man called Crane felt the stir of hope that he might have shaken the implacable pursuers from the desert.

The hostler took charge of the mare with a sigh of relief. "The desert's no place for a sick man to be riding," he said worriedly. "I was afraid you'd gotten lost."

Crane smiled. He looked his thirty years only when he smiled. In repose his long, horsey features had an older, preoccupied cast.

"Sat around out by Purple Butte and watched the sunset," he explained. "I guess I forgot how far I had gone from town."

"Good thing you made it in before it got really bad out there," the stableman nodded. "Looks like it's gonna be a helluva night."

Crane agreed.

He left the stable and walked the block to the hotel, bucking the gritty wind. He met no one on the walk, although in front of the *Oro Grande* Saloon a pair of hipshot horses tailed the wind.

The El Dorado loomed its three-storied bulk above him, its shadow enclosing him and bringing a sense of security. In another minute he'd pass through that door and be safe. A half sigh of relief escaped his tight-pressed lips.

The faded wooden sign creaked mournfully overhead as he went up the steps. The wide veranda fronting the hotel was dark and deserted, the empty chairs lying like mute spectators against the wall.

He paused with his hand on the knob of the heavy door, composing his face before entering.

The arrow made no sound that he heard. It came out of the night, from

across the street, driven with terrific force. It hit him between his shoulder blades and went completely through him, burying its blunt iron head in the thick plank door.

The detective's body twitched and jerked in silent agony, and finally stilled. The tough hickory shaft held his weight, like a butterfly pinned to a board. He was stilled there, nailed grotesquely to the door, when Mrs. Amy Rankin, coming to pick up the hotel wash, saw him.

There was a brief lag before the horror penetrated her slow mind and was translated into a high, prolonged shriek of terror . . .

TOWN MARSHAL Tom Benton found the body surrounded by a small cluster of silent, uncomfortable men. Phil Petersen, editor of the Dry Gulch Chronicle, helped him free Crane's body and bring him into the lobby.

They laid Crane out on the leather-covered settees and Benton stood over him, feeling the dryness forming in his mouth, giving his tongue a cottony texture. He was a grizzled man in his late forties and he had been a lawman most of his life. Fear was something he had seldom experienced. But he was afraid now—afraid of the unnameable, the unknown, the grim, cruel menace that hid out in the Escalante.

Petersen, a tall, stringy man about the marshal's age, was holding the short, blunt-headed arrow in his hands. He turned to Benton with a worried frown. "Ever see anything like this before, Tom?"

Benton shook his head. The arrow bore no resemblance to any he had ever seen, nor could he imagine the bow which had driven it with such terrific force.

Petersen swore. "Who did it, Tom? What are we going to do about it?"

The marshal offered no reply. He had done all he could when he had written his letter to Ranger Captain Bill McDowell—all he could do now was wait.

The newspaper editor ran lean fingers through his iron gray hair. The unruly mop made him look like a terrier. His eyes were a bright, almost fanatical blue.

"They've got us scared to death!" he said bitterly. "Not only us, but every town bordering the desert. They raid as they please, and they kill as they wish, with seeming impunity—"

The marshal turned away. He knew from past experience that when the Chronicle publisher was aroused he'd be

JIM HATFIELD

the target of the man's ire, of his unreasoning denunciation.

"Wait a minute, Benton!" Petersen's voice was harsh. "You told me you had sent for Ranger help. Where are they?"

The marshal gave him a cold look, then shrugged his heavy shoulders. He didn't bother to amplify his reply. He pushed

open the door and stepped out into the dark, windy street. He felt Petersen's accusation weigh on him; the question the publisher had asked nagged at him.

He walked toward his office, but stopped off at the Butte View Lunch where his niece, Ruth, worked. His brother-in-law, Sam Dillman, pushed a mug of coffee across the counter to him.

"Have your supper yet, Tom?" he asked gruffly.

The marshal shook his head. "Not hungry," he muttered. He turned on his stool as Ruth came into the lunchroom, a shawl over her head. She shook sand from it as she came to the counter.

"I just heard about Bob Crane," she said quickly. "Such a horrible way to die."

Tom Benton took a sip of his coffee. His face was drawn. "The whole thing's too much for me to handle, Sam," he said. "It's not my job, anyway. I've tried to tell George Vollner that. He's got twenty-five thousand dollars in his office safe that he's afraid to move out of town on his stage line. He wants me to be responsible." The marshal made a wry face.

Sam said earnestly: "Chuck it, Tom. Let them hire another man, if they can."

"Not yet, Sam. I've put in a call for that Ranger they call the Lone Wolf. I'll wait around until he shows up."

"One man?" Sam said. He shook his bald head. "One man against what's out there in the Escalante?" He licked his lips in a nervous gesture.

Tom's slate gray eyes held their growing worry. "Jim Hatfield, Sam. We'll find out if he's half as good as the stories we've heard."

"No man is that good, Tom," Sam muttered. "Captain McDowell is a fool if he sends only one man out here!"

Tom got off his stool, not wishing to argue. He turned to the door and Ruth called after him: "I'll bring you a tray later on, Uncle Tom." He turned and nodded, giving her a tired smile.

He found the note tacked on his front door. It was too dark to read it. He tore it loose and brought it inside the office, pausing to lock the door behind him. He was aware that he had left a window open and he closed it and drew the shade before lighting the lamp on his desk.

The message he held in his fist was blunt and to the point. It said:

YOU'RE NEXT, MARSHAL

He felt the fear crawl down his spine as he read it. He crumpled the note in his fist and flung it on the desk and wheeled grimly for the gun rack against the east wall. He stepped on a hard object as he reached for the double-barreled shotgun and looking down he saw the knife Crane had tossed in through the window.

For a moment the meaning of it eluded him; he stared down dumbly at the weapon, his big hands clenched around the shotgun. Then he bent down and picked up the knife and brought it under the lamplight on the desk. Propping the shotgun against the desk side, he unknotted the string which held the note to the bone handle and spread the missive out under the lamp.

Smoothing the creases out with a horny palm, he scowled at the pencilled lines that at first made no sense to him.

Go east, young man, go east
Into the land of emptiness
Where the stars shine bright
And the binnacle light
Beckons to the lone wanderer.

Go west, young man, go west
To the rock of the skull
And then south as the harpoon points.

The strange message ended there, as though the writer had been interrupted. The marshal read the cryptic lines a half dozen times, trying to make sense of them; trying to imagine who migh have written them.

Bob Crane?

THE Easterner wrote jingles and verse, and some of his work had appeared in the Chronicle, written in the same manner as these lines. But if it was Crane

who had written this, what did it mean? Why had he taken this method of sending it to him?

Had Crane been killed because of this? The possibility turned the marshal's worried thoughts to the man who had been killed less than an hour ago.

Go west, young man, go west.

Tom Benton pulled his can of tobacco to him and filled his pipe. The words in front of him began to make sense only if Bob Crane was not what he had seemed to be. They made sense only if Bob Crane had somehow found out what was out there in the Escalante—

He heard the sounds of an approaching rider then and his next motions were reflexive. He folded Crane's note into a small square and buried it under the tobacco in the tin on his desk; then he blew out the light and picked up the shotgun and turned to the door.

The rider pulled up in front of the office. Benton waited in the dark, feeling the blood pound in his ears. He heard the horse blow and bit irons jingled in the night.

Then a voice called, "Marshal!"

Benton sucked in a harsh breath. What in hell was he afraid of? He cursed his fear and walked to the door. He drew the bolt and swung the door wide and stood to one side, hidden by the darkness inside the office. Under his horny thumb the shotgun hammers clicked softly.

Murky starlight showed him the dark bulk of a rangy man sitting saddle of a big black horse with a blaze face. A star glittered dimly from the man's coat—a star set in a gleaming circle of silver.

Tom Benton recognized that badge as the symbol of Ranger authority. Relief welled up in him, making his voice slightly unsteady. He stepped through the doorway.

"Ranger, I'm sure glad to see you."

The man on the black horse eyed him with quiet appraisal. His face was hidden in the shadow of his hat brim.

"You Marshal Tom Benton?"

Benton nodded.

"I'm Jim Hatfield," the stranger said. "Texas Ranger."

"Hatfield?" Benton took a long breath. "I never met you, Jim. But I was never happier to meet a man." He made a gesture toward his office. "Come inside. I've got a lot to tell you."

"What about?"

Benton paused in the act of turning. "About what's out there in the desert." His mouth twisted harshly. "I've seen a lot of strange things in my day, Hatfield, but the bunch out there—"

"You know what's out there, eh?" The man's voice was soft, like the purring of a jungle cat.

"I've got an idea," Benton admitted. "It's been growing. And thanks to a feller named Bob Crane, I've got an idea where to look."

He saw the thin reflection from the man's Colt as it came out of holster, but the grim implication behind the motion lagged in his head. He stood in the doorway, frowning. And then he saw the muzzle come up and he made a belated effort to swing the shotgun muzzle up.

The slug dropped him limply across his threshold.

The black snorted and jumped at the muzzle blast close to its ear and the gunman cursed him as his second shot went wild. He was trying to steady the black for another shot when the girl, coming to the office with a loaded supper try, screamed.

The killer whirled the black and dug spurs into the sleek flanks. He was a shadow lost in the darkness beyond the arroyo before Ruth reached the side of her uncle and knelt beside him.

CHAPTER II

Two Strangers for Dry Gulch

TEN DAYS later the first of the two strangers to arrive in Dry Gulch stepped from the morning stage and

checked in at the El Dorado. He was a man of medium height, of stocky, muscular build and not more than twenty-five years old. He wore a flat-crowned black hat over unruly carrot-red hair and the square face, touched with freckles, had a pugnacious cast.

He wore a long gray coat over a gun belt and holster, and the name he penned on the hotel register was Marvey Holt.

The hotel clerk was a tall sinewy-necked man who maintained an avid interest in all the El Dorado's guests. He read the name and because it stirred a familiar chord in his long memory, he said: "Staying with us long, Mr. Holt?"

The stranger was turning away from the desk when the remark came; he turned and surveyed the clerk with candid regard. "Depends," he murmured.

The clerk's curiousity remained unblunted. "Dry Gulch is kinda out of the way, now that the Santa Fe built that spur to Concho. What with the trouble we been having, we don't get many strangers here any more." His smile was a come-on.

Holt scratched the red thatch above his left ear. "Sort of came prepared for trouble," he said levelly. His eyes had a cold blue directness as they met the clerk's. "I'm looking for a gent who goes by the name of Bob Crane."

The clerk swallowed hard and the smile left his stringy features. "Bob Crane?" he echoed weakly.

"Heard he worked here," Holt said. He was facing the desk, but out of the corner of his eyes he saw one of the loungers in the lobby get up and head for the door and a glint came and vanished in his gaze.

"He did," the clerk said. He licked his lips, somehow strangely unnerved by this youngster with the familiar name which he could not quite place. "You—you'll find him in boothill, at the end of Desert Avenue."

He saw no emotion on that cocky, freckled face. But Holt's voice was softer, asking its question, "When did it happen?"

"Ten days ago. Right outside this door." The clerk swept his left arm across the desk. He mumbled a version of what had happened to Bob Crane. "They got the marshal the same night," he concluded. "They just missed killing him, but he ain't the same man anymore."

"They?" Holt was frowning.

"The Escalante raiders," the clerk said. His voice dropped as he mentioned them, and his eyes made an instinctive search of the lobby.

Holt nodded. He picked up his key and his bag and his smile had a cold twist to it. "Reckon I'll be staying a bit longer than I expected," he said, and went up to his room.

He remained just long enough to wash and change his shirt. When he came back through the lobby the clerk was no longer behind the desk. The fact made its impression in him, but did not bother him.

He stepped outside and oriented himself, a cool, somehow dangerous man paused on the top of the hotel steps. Desert Avenue ran south to the desert, and in the slanting sun he saw the wooden markers dotting the sand hill at the end of town.

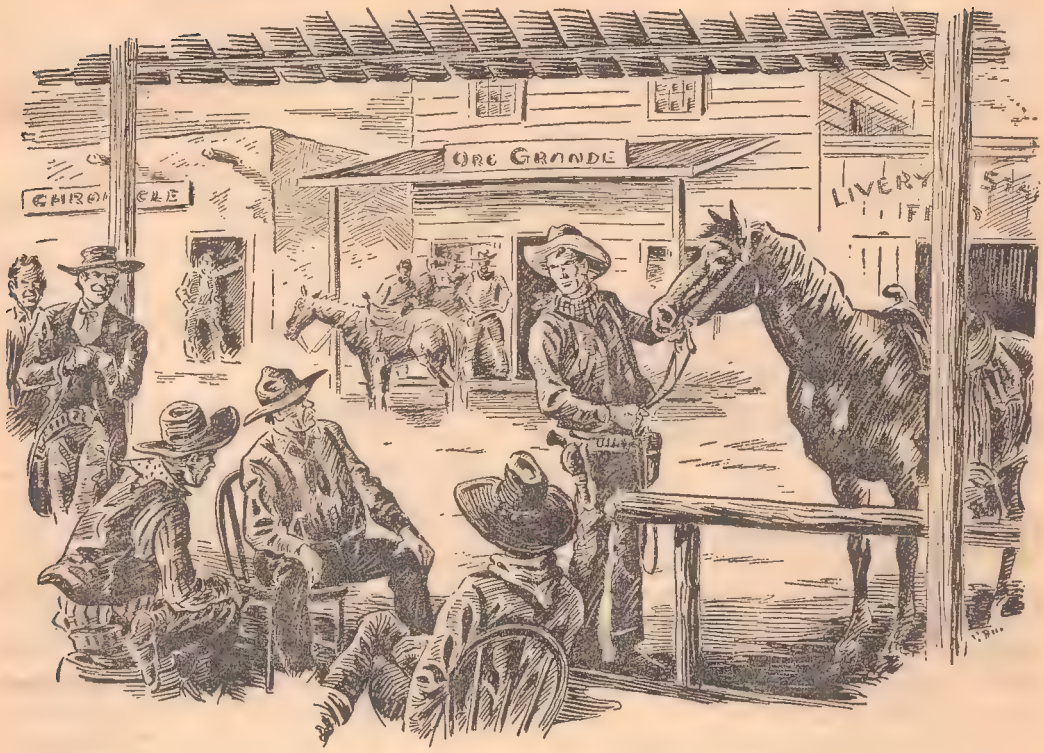
It took him five minutes to reach the desolate cemetery baking under the high sun and only a few moments to find the new grave, piled with rocks to keep the nocturne prowlers from digging in the soft sand. A wooden marker bore the painted legend:

Died June 11, 1887

A tin can bright with daffodils was wedged among the rocks. He looked at it, wondering who had thought enough of the dead man to remember him this way. He was silent in the sun, his thoughts going back a long way both in time and distance—then he heard the whirr of wheels as they crossed the sand in the arroyo and he was in Dry Gulch again, standing by his brother's grave.

He didn't turn, although he heard the vehicle come up the hill road and stop close behind him. Not until a high, raspy

Contempt showed on the faces of the men as the Lone Wolf dismounted



voice asked bluntly: "Friend of yours, stranger?"

Holt stepped back and around and looked at the buggy where two men sat on the spring seat. The driver was a tall, stringy sort of man with a shock of iron-gray hair and bright blue eyes. He was wearing a long black frock coat, a white shirt and a black string tie topped by a narrow-brim black hat. He had a quick, nervous way about him and he repeated his question with a rising impatience.

Marvey Holt shrugged. "Why?"

"I'm Phil Petersen," the driver snapped. "Publisher of the Chronicle." He didn't introduce the hard-faced man beside him.

Holt took a cigar from his breast pocket and put it between his teeth. "You looking for news?" he said quietly.

"I'm after information," Petersen replied. "You asked about Crane at the hotel. Was he a friend of yours?"

"Maybe. Maybe not." Holt's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"You stepped off the stage a half hour ago," Petersen pointed out. "And the first thing you ask is about Bob Crane. You tell me why, stranger."

"Might be he owed me five bucks," Holt said coldly. "Don't figger it's any of your business, Petersen. Not even if you were the law—and I don't happen to see a badge on you. Or on your scowling friend, either."

The gunman beside the Chronicle publisher leaned forward in the seat, a lean and watchful look tightening his horsey features.

Petersen's fingers closed over his forearm. "Let it pass, Nick. We want no trouble with him." He turned to Holt. "I asked a civil question, son. There's been a lot of trouble around here lately. And maybe more to come. I think you can understand my interest in any stranger who comes to Dry Gulch and

asks questions about a man recently murdered."

Holt nodded slightly. "You asked the question, pop. But I'll hold onto the answers."

Anger pushed its dark tide in Petersen's face. He studied Holt with bright regard, his lips sucking against his store teeth. "All right, son," he said. "Just don't step too wide, or too fast, while you're in town. That's a warning."

Holt watched him swing the buggy around, head down the hill. His hand brushed against his Colt butt as he reached in his pocket for a match. "I told you you were playing out of your class, Bob," he murmured. "You wouldn't listen."

THE SECOND stranger rode into Dry Gulch along no beaten trail. He appeared at the edge of town in midafternoon, with the sun hot against his dusty shoulders. He came from direction of Iron Butte rising like a gnarled fist southwest of town.

He was a tall man with a wide spread of shoulders tapering down to a lean flat waist. The brass shells in his cartridge belts glinted in the sunlight; the pair of Peacemakers below them had an unobtrusive deadliness. His was a dark, strong face drawn into sober lines by a thousand lonely trails and his eyes, green as sunshot jade, reflected his aloneness in their cold and noncommital appraisal.

He was a man who stood out alone or in a crowd—and he rode a horse that made the same impression. A big sorrel stud who had the marks of a thoroughbred in every sleek-muscled line. Both man and horse came into Dry Gulch with the dust of the desert on them.

He crossed the arroyo by the goat path Bob Crane had taken ten days before and the first building he came to was the law office, casting its thin edge of shade across the widening road. The sign over the door read:

MARSHAL'S OFFICE

and the stranger took this in before letting his glance rest on the stoop-shouldered man sitting on a bench by the closed door. Bandages showed under the man's hat and pain had carved recent lines in the man's leathery face—he stood with head bowed, whittling a Colt out of a hunk of soft pine.

Jim Hatfield eased Goldy to a halt and leaned on his forearms. He asked gently: "Are you Tom Benton?"

Benton's head came up. The eyes that searched Jim's face had a vacant look. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, grinned fatuously. "Howdy," he said.

Jim frowned. "You the marshal of Dry Gulch?"

Benton's right hand lifted to his lapel; his fingers fumbled aimlessly. "Marshal?" His hand moved on to his face and a puzzled look came into his eyes.

"You sent for me," Jim said slowly. "Don't you remember?"

Benton looked up at the Lone Wolf. His eyes were dark and tortured with the effort of remembering. A light seemed to probe through the murk of forgetfulness; it faded. He licked his lips. "Can't remember," he mumbled. He ran the balls of his fingers across his forehead. "Who are you?"

"The name's Hatfield," Jim said. "Texas Ranger."

The name produced an instant reaction in the older man. He jerked back, as if expecting a blow. A strangled cry came from his lips. Then he turned and jammed his shoulder against the closed door, his fingers fumbling with the latch. He disappeared inside.

Jim frowned. He had come a long way at this man's call for help; he couldn't understand the man's actions.

He heard a girl's voice call and he turned his attention up the road, to the first cluster of buildings making up Dry Gulch.

A girl was running toward him. He could see her face, white in the sun, and the urgency in her voice hammered against him.

"Leave him alone!" she cried. "Can't you see he's been hurt?"

Jim swung out of saddle. He stepped down on the side away from the law office—and that move saved his life.

The marshal appeared in the doorway with a shotgun. He had the muzzle tilted up and just as Jim dismounted, the shotgun blast went over Goldy's saddle.

The big sorrel jerked away from the explosion. Jim whirled, took three strides that brought him up against the adobe wall. His right hand Colt came up just as Benton's muzzle made its sharp-swinging arc to follow him.

He heard the girl scream as he fired. He aimed for the shotgun, but his slug ricocheted off the barrel and tore a bad gash in Benton's forearm.

The marshal dropped the shotgun. He crouched in the doorway, like a whipped cur, his eyes wild. And then Ruth Dillman came between him and the Lone Wolf.

CHAPTER III

Get Out of Town, Ranger!

JIM HATFIELD stepped away from the building side. He had acted instinctively to save his life. Now, as his shadow moved across this girl, a frown filtered across the grim hardness of his face.

Benton was huddled against the door framing, the shotgun lying at his feet. He was clutching his injured arm and staring over the girl's shoulder like a boy who expects to be whipped.

"Leave him alone!" the girl said. Her voice was shrill, on the verge of cracking, and there was fear stamped deep in her eyes.

The Lone Wolf slid his Colt inside his holster and made a pacifying gesture. "I didn't aim to hurt him, Miss," he said gently. "I don't know why he tried to kill me. I came here to help him."

"He's been hurt," she answered brokenly. "Uncle Tom doesn't know what he's doing."

"Said he was a Ranger," Benton broke in. His voice held the inflection of an odd hate. He looked at Jim with narrowing eyes; his unshaven face had a slack, confused look. "He came to kill me, Ruth. Like the other feller."

Ruth took him by the arm. "He won't hurt you, Uncle Tom." She turned her head to Jim and her eyes had a pleading look. "He's made a mistake, stranger. He thinks you've come to kill him!"

Jim frowned. He was conscious of men beginning to crowd around them. Goldy edged up to muzzle his shoulder, sensing the unfriendliness surrounding them.

A harried-looking man in shirtsleeves broke through the edge of that crowd and came to stand beside Ruth. He turned and faced the big Ranger with belligerent scowl, an old model Dragoon in his hand.

"What's happened, Ruth" Sam Dillman asked. "This hombre looking for trouble?"

The irony of the situation brought a bleak smile to the Lone Wolf's lips. He had come to Dry Gulch at Marshal Benton's request—this was a strange way to be greeted.

"I reckon there's been a slight misunderstanding," he said drily. "I came to town on official business. I'm a Ranger."

"Ranger?" Sam's eyes held a puzzled squint. He turned to his daughter. "Did Tom try to—"

She nodded. "I think Uncle Tom made a mistake, dad. He tried to kill this man."

"Kill who? What's going on?" Phil Petersen's voice had a sharply authoritative ring as he pushed through the sullen crowd. The horsey-faced Nick was with him.

Petersen was bareheaded—a tall, spare-bodied man in white shirt and black string tie. He looked more like some preacher than a newspaper editor, or maybe it was because there was a little of both in Petersen. He turned to face Hatfield, his voice

harshly demanding, "Who are you?"

Jim sensed the hostility in the crowd. They were waiting for his answer with a sullen expectancy, and it occurred to him that Dry Gulch was a town ridden by trouble and that all strangers were suspect. He could see little gain in keeping his identity from them.

"I'm a Ranger," he said. "I'm here on official business."

Petersen stiffened. "Ranger? You can prove that?"

"If I have to," Jim answered flatly.

The Chronicle publisher hesitated, absorbing this. Then he turned to the crowd. "All right, break it up!" he ordered. He had a domineering, insolent way of talking, a high-handedness born of some inner confidence. Perhaps it was compounded by the presence of the sneering, two-gunned man that was standing beside him.

He turned to face Ruth and her father. "You better take Tom home," he snapped. "And keep him away from here. I'm closing this office until we can get another marshal."

Tom Benton pushed past Ruth. "I'm still marshal of Dry Gulch," he protested. He lifted his blood-stained hand to his temple and his fingers left streaks on his bandage. His voice trailed away as if he was no longer sure of himself. "I am still marshal—"

"Sure you are," Sam Dillman growled, eyeing Petersen. "But we've got to get you to Doc Harrigan first. Get that gash bandaged."

Benton allowed himself to be led away. The crowd was breaking up, straggling back up the street. Ruth paused to look back at Hatfield.

"He didn't know what he was doing, Ranger," she said. "Please believe that."

Jim nodded. "I'm not holding it against him," he reassured her.

Phil Petersen walked to the doorway and picked up the shotgun Benton had dropped.

He disappeared inside with it, returning the weapon to the wall rack.

WHEN he came to the door the waning sun was in his face, outlining with harsh clarity the deep arrogant lines grooving his mouth. "I'm Phil Petersen, publisher of the Chronicle," he said introducing himself. "This is Nick Cates."

Jim let his regard touch the cold-eyed gunman. Cates was measuring him with professional appraisal and a bleak curiousity stirred in the Lone Wolf's thoughts. What was the publisher of the Chronicle doing with a hired gunhand?

Petersen's face showed traces of annoyance as he asked: "You say you're a Ranger?"

Jim nodded. "The name's Jim Hatfield."

He saw the shock of surprise burst in Petersen's intense blue eyes. The man had been in the act of turning, closing the law office door, then suddenly he swung back to face Jim, his gaze narrowing. His lips sucked in against yellow-stained teeth.

"Oh, yes," he murmured. "The Lone Wolf!"

Cates had come forward on his toes, an alertness tensing his lean frame. The thin edge of insolence faded from his appraisal, to be replaced by a remote antagonism.

"Marshal Tom Benton wrote to Headquarters for help," Jim explained levelly. "I came as soon as I could."

Petersen nodded slowly. "I've been expecting you, Hatfield. But if you'll excuse my saying so—" his lips stretched thin in a cynical smile—"I don't think even the famed Lone Wolf can handle Tom Benton's trouble."

Hatfield's tone held a remotely amused note. "That bad, eh?"

"That bad," Petersen affirmed. He made a gesture up the street. "No sense in standing out here, Jim. Come on down to my office. I'll let you know what you're in for!"

The Chronicle faced the El Dorado at an angle across the dusty width of Main Street. It was a two-story frame building with outside stairs leading to living

quarters above the shop.

Show windows flanked the door, each of which carried the lettered legend:

THE CHRONICLE
The Voice of the Escalante
Philip Petersen, Publisher

The man working at the type cases was short and dumpy-looking. He turned a slack, red-veined face to Hatfield as the Ranger followed Petersen and Nick inside and the lack-lustre eyes of a man just getting over a drunk showed little interest as Petersen introduced him.

"This is Red Casey," the publisher said. "Best typesetter west of the Mississippi—when he's sober.

They went on into a small office partitioned off at the rear of the shop. Cates waited in the doorway.

"Nick," Petersen said, turning. "Get Elias Woods to put a new lock on the door of the marshal's office. I'll see that Sam keeps Tom Benton away from there."

Cates nodded, laid a cold and calculating glance on Hatfield, then went out.

Petersen motioned the Lone Wolf to a chair, walked to the one behind the desk and sat down. He opened the lid of a box of cigars and pushed the box to Jim. Hatfield selected one and lighted up.

"What happened to Tom Benton?" he asked.

Petersen eased back in his chair. "Just a minute," he smiled cunningly. "I heard you call yourself Jim Hatfield. But I haven't seen any identification."

Hatfield shrugged. He reached inside his boot for his badge, placed it on the desk in front of the newspaper man. From his wallet he added more identification.

Petersen's eyes seemed to grow brighter. "You're Hatfield," he admitted. "But Benton had no authority calling in the Rangers. I told him he was making a mistake. This thing out there is too big for one man, or for a company of Rangers! That's why I wrote to the governor myself—"

"Just what is the trouble here?" the Lone Wolf interrupted.

"Didn't Tom explain it?"

"Some of it. Something about a bunch of killers with a hideout in the Escalante. He mentioned the leader was some crackpot who called himself the Baron."

"Crackpot!" Petersen came forward in his chair, his eyes glittering. "Tom Benton was a fool! He didn't realize just what he and the rest of us are up against! He— just a minute, Jim."

Hatfield waited as Petersen pushed back and fumbled in a lower drawer. He brought out a rolled poster which he flattened on the desk in front of Jim.

"Ever see this before?"

Jim stood up and read the blunt message.

NOTICE NOTICE
This land belongs to the Republic of Deserta. You will be given ten days to clear out. Violators will be shot. Trespassing without the payment of taxes is strictly forbidden and trespassers will be dealt with according to the provisions of the laws of Deserta.
The Baron.

"These posters are scattered all along the Escalante," Petersen said. "Two small ranchers have been burned out, three others pulled stakes and left. Out past Iron Butte the SB spread's got a linehouse—the linehouse was burned down and their man shot."

Jim was frowning. "When did it start?"

"About six months ago," the Chronicle editor said. He ran long lean fingers through his wiry hair. "About three months after I came to Dry Gulch."

He got up and went to a small cabinet and took out a bottle and two glasses. "Didn't Benton tell you anything, Ranger?"

Jim shook his head. "Only what I told you. I guess he intended to talk to me after I got here."

PETERSEN poured. He was generous with his liquor. "Benton was a fool," he repeated coldly. "Good enough town marshal, I imagine, against the usual trouble. Now—" he shrugged callously. "Maybe he'd be better off if that bullet had killed him."

Jim appraised the man, wondering what had been between Petersen and the marshal. "Reckon you two didn't hit it off," he said.

Petersen took a swallow of liquor and put his glass down with a slight grimace. It occurred to Jim that the man was not a drinking man; that he kept this whiskey on hand for company only.

"Benton was a close-mouthed fool!" Petersen snapped. "He wouldn't listen to me at all. I told him this thing was big, that this Baron is crazy all right, crazy like a fox. But he preferred to work with that Easterner, Bob Crane."

"Crane?" Jim's voice was curious. "Benton didn't mention working with anyone here."

Petersen's eyes held a glint of annoyance. "I'm just guessing there, Jim," he said. "But Benton was shot the same night Bob Crane was killed. I guess I just sort of connected the two together." He saw the look in the Lone Wolf's face and he added harshly, "Might as well fill you in on what happened that night."

Jim listened. He couldn't make the connection Petersen had, not from Petersen's story.

He couldn't see any reason why Crane was killed at all, not if the man was what he had appeared to be.

"He was killed by an arrow," Petersen said. He reached in his drawer again and placed the short shaft on the desk, on the poster.

"I'm no authority on Indians or arrows," he growled. "But that doesn't look like any arrow used around here."

Jim picked it up. The short hardwood shaft had a sharp notch and short chicken feathers to guide it. The iron head was almost blunt—it was hammered out of shape now by impact.

"Went clean through him and into two inches of oak door," Petersen said.

Something about that arrow nagged at Jim. He had seen or read about it somewhere. An odd weapon to use, he thought grimly—and the trouble here took on new proportions.

Benton's letter, blunt and misspelled, had carried a tangible fear:

> Dear Captin McDowell:
> I ain't much of a hand at writin. I've bin a peace officer most of my life an I don't scare easy. But we bin having trouble here. Holdups. Killings. Can't seem to pin down who's behin it. Keep hearin rumors of a jasper who calls himself The Baron. He's got a tough bunch with him an he's got a hangout in the Escalante. I think the man's crazy. He claims the desert belongs to him an most of the range bordering it. There's ben signs posted all along here—I'll show them to your man when he comes. If you can send that ace troubleshooter of yores down here, the Ranger they call the Lone Wolf, I'd feel a lot easier. I'll be waitin for him or from some word from you.

Jim put the arrow back on the desk and got to his feet. "Maybe it is bigger than I can handle, Petersen," he said evenly. "But I'm here, and I'll take a crack at it. And to make things official, I'll take over Marshal Benton's job for a while."

Petersen shook his head. "Hatfield, I've nothing against you, but Tom Benton sent for you, not me. I think you're making a mistake staying. This Baron's playing a game too big for you."

"Let me be the judge of that," the Lone Wolf cut in drily.

The annoyance spread across Petersen's grooved face; his eyes had a thin gleam of malevolence.

"You've got a reputation, Hatfield. But this time you're overreaching yourself." He spread his hands in a pacifying gesture. "Look—the governor's due in here day after tomorrow. This is an election year and he was making a political tour through Concho anyway. I wrote I wanted to see him, I got word he'd come through Dry Gulch on his swing north. Let the governor deal with this—this Baron!"

Jim shrugged. "I'll see what I can do, until the governor shows up." His smile had an iron quality that reached back into the green depths of his eyes. "I'm kind of interested in this character who wants to secede a large part of Texas from the Union."

CHAPTER IV

Don't Crowd Me, Fella

NICK CATES' long shadow fell across the stubby carpenter who was putting a new lock on the marshal's door. The horse-faced gunman had just come out of the office where he had made one more tour of inspection. The dusty interior, he observed, was about the way it had been the night Tom Benton was shot.

He heard the rider approaching and he turned to face him, his long face growing curious and yet remote. He had heard stories about this big man riding the golden stallion and a thin excitement pulsed in Cates and made its watchful glitter in his eyes.

He stepped away from the man working on the lock, his right thumb coming up to hook carelessly in his cartridge belt.

The Lone Wolf pulled to a stop a few paces from the law office. The day was dying, but there was a dull haze over the desert, like a low fog bank rolling toward Dry Gulch. In the town itself the air was still; the heat of the day had a breathless quality.

Elias Woods stopped working on the lock and glanced at Jim. His attention was caught by the Ranger's narrowing frown; he turned and looked at Nick helplessly, sensing the tension whipsawing him.

"Keep working, Elias!" Nick ordered harshly.

Elias licked his lips. He had a hammer and a chisel in his hands, but they were suddenly clumsy tools over which he had little control.

The Lone Wolf rested his hands on his pommel. He could feel the push of the man's belligerence and he knew that Nick Cates was set for trouble.

He shifted slightly, running his gaze along the sandy street to the beginning of the business block where men were grouping in small knots on the walks. The scent of trouble was all through town, but they were keeping their distance.

It puzzled Hatfield. He had not expected to run into this kind of trouble and the town's antagonism made him curious.

But it was more than an aloof antagonism he felt in Nick. There was a more personal emotion in the gunman's sneering regard. Naked in his eyes was the hot arrogance of a fast gun debating his chances with the famed speed of the Lone Wolf.

"I'll take the keys to that lock," Jim said slowly. "I'm taking over the office."

Nick shook his head. "I've got my orders, Ranger. You heard Petersen tell me to lock this place up."

"Petersen own this building?"

Nick's long face held a thin insolence now. "I wouldn't know."

The Lone Wolf considered this man's attitude. He had not come looking for trouble with any of Dry Gulch's citizens.

"I'll check on it," he decided. "I'll be around later for those keys."

The sneer spread across Nick's lips. He was making the big man back water and contempt rode his reply.

"You may be a holy terror where you come from, Ranger. But to me you're just a big guy asking for trouble. Don't crowd me!"

Hatfield held back the thrust of his anger with iron control. He knew Cates' kind. The man would keep pushing him now, made bold by Jim's apparent hesitation.

"I'll be back," he said bleakly. "Don't crowd your luck." He turned Goldy away before Nick could reply.

The gunman's laughter followed him, riding the first rise of wind off the desert. A moaning, gritty wind born somewhere over the burning reaches of the Escalante. A swirl of sand ran along the street and enveloped him; he felt the sting of it against his neck.

The Lone Wolf rode back to the El Dorado, his face dark, his emotions gripped by his iron will. He saw the men lined up along the front of the Oro Grande

Saloon and he caught the run of contempt in their glances.

Nick's tone had been loud and the wind had carried it to them—the Lone Wolf saw this and knew he had made a mistake. He saw Petersen standing on the walk in front of the Chronicle and he knew he was being judged.

He turned Goldy in to the El Dorado's hitchrack and dismounted. He could almost feel the expectancy in the men on the veranda. He had backed down from Nick Cates.

There was a shuffling among those men as he ducked under the rack and went up the steps. The sun shone red against the peeling clapboards, filtered through the piling dust clouds. It fell across the Lone Wolf's path like spilled blood.

"I reckon Nick Cates figgered you right," a cocky voice jabbed at him. "Six feet high and yellow clear through!"

JIM HATFIELD paused. His iron will crumbled and a soft sigh escaped from him as he turned to face the owner of the sneering voice.

He was standing by the veranda railing and men had given him quick clearance. Jim looked him over, from flat-crowned black hat sitting at a cocky angle on a thatch of crisp red hair to dusty, hand-tooled boots. In between was a muscular body clothed in gray coat and black trousers. The coat was unbuttoned and a bone-handled Colt rode high and was set for a left handed cross draw.

The flat-crowned hat and the red hair rang a bell in Jim's mind and the name clicked into place. Marvey Holt! One of the top guns in the recent San Saba range war!

Dry Gulch was not a place he had expected to find a gunslinger like Marvey Holt, but then the desert town was full of surprises. He checked the run of his thoughts and faced the youngster, and the smile on his lips was small and humorless.

Marshal Benton had obviously made no secret of having sent for him, and Dry Gulch had been waiting for him to show up. The town was waiting to see if the Lone Wolf measured up. He was being judged and weighed, and a cold and bitter anger glittered in his green gaze.

"You talking to me, son?" he asked softly.

Marvey grinned crookedly. "I heard you're Jim Hatfield, the Ranger folks call the Lone Wolf. From where I sit somebody's got the stories all wrong. Either you ain't this big bad Ranger, or you're yella—"

A spinning puff of sand ran across the road and spilled between them. For a moment it hung betwen them, like a tenuous curtain. The Lone Wolf's voice reached through it, curiously flat-toned.

"That Colt's too big for you, son. I'm going to take it away from you."

Marvey drew. He slid into a crouch and his left hand stabbed for his butt.

The smiling man in front of him seemed to vanish behind a burst of flame and a puff of black smoke. A hammer seemed to slam the gun out of his hand—the ricocheting bullet went through his coat tail and cut a three-inch gash across his left hip.

Weaponless, unbelieving, Marvey Holt stood frozen. The Lone Wolf loomed up out of the gunsmoke. Dropping his Peacemaker back into holster, he backhanded Marvey across the mouth.

The blow spun the gunman against the railing. Pain and a blind anger jerked him around. He ran into an iron fist that doubled him up; the blow that connected with the side of his jaw dropped him limp across the railing.

It had ended so swiftly some of the men crowding around the hotel door had not seen it at all.

Jim picked up Marvey's Colt and thrust it under his belt. Then he turned to the unconscious youngster, shifted his limp weight up on his left shoulder and started back down the stairs.

The hotel crowd clustered on the stairs until they determined where the Ranger was headed. Then they followed, slowly.

Jim Hatfield walked with long stride toward the marshal's office. He went past the Butte View Lunchroom and from the corner of his eyes saw Ruth Dillman and her father come to the door and stare at him. Then his attention was on Nick Cates, standing by the low adobe building, facing him.

Elias Woods had finished with the lock. He had put his tools in his box and was standing, staring at the burdened man coming toward them.

Jim's voice reached out to the gunman; it rang flat in the street, rising above the wind. "I'll take that key now, Nick!"

Nick Cates hunched his shoulders in momentary indecision. He had not clearly witnessed what had taken place on the porch of the El Dorado, and he didn't care if the man slung over the big Ranger's shoulder was dead or alive. But what he saw in this big man's eyes was not reassuring. He felt the momentary surge of panic end in a tight cold knot at the pit of his stomach.

"Don't crowd me, Ranger!" he snarled. "I told you—" He went for his gun in sudden decision.

The Lone Wolf's right hand disappeared in a burst of smoke. Nick spun around and fell against the adobe wall. He put out his left hand in blind effort to hold himself erect. His nails left tiny marks on the wall as he fell.

HATFIELD made a motion with his Colt. "Open the door," he told Woods. "Then hand me the key."

The carpenter obeyed. He pushed the marshal's door open and held out the keys to the new lock.

Jim took them as he walked inside with Marvey beginning to stir on his shoulder. He walked the length of the room to the door in the rear which opened to a back room with one small barred window and a cot against the wall. He dumped Holt on the straw mattress, closed and locked the door.

He paused by Tom Benton's desk, his anger still bright in his eyes. Outside a crowd was gathering around the horse-faced gunman; he could hear their murmuring rise above the wind.

The sun was a pale red in the street and there was an irritating quality to the rasp of the wind. The Lone Wolf took a deep breath. He had been pushed since his arrival here—he had run into an antagonism he could not pin down.

There was an undercurrent of fear and hate and mistrust in Dry Gulch, a bad combination to overcome.

Hatfield took the badge from his boot and pinned it on his coat. He had not wanted it this way, but with Tom Benton in the condition he was, there was only one course open to him.

The Lone Wolf walked to the door and faced the muttering crowd. "The name's Jim Hatfield!" he announced flatly. "Texas Ranger. I'm the law here, until you folks get another marshal!"

The crowd shuffled silently, accepting this with sullen acquiescence. Someone said: "We need more than a Ranger here," but no one else took him up.

Jim turned to Nick Cates who was trying to sit up; the man's lips were twisted in pained grimace. He didn't look up at Hatfield.

"Someone get him to a doctor," the Lone Wolf ordered. "The rest of you go home. There's not going to be any more trouble tonight!"

The crowd dispersed slowly, two of them helping Cates to his feet and taking him with them. Jim let his attention turn to the darkening Escalante. The dust storm was at the edge of town now and the wind had an ominous howl.

He turned to go back inside; Petersen's harsh voice stopped him.

"Just a minute, Hatfield!"

Hatfield turned to face the newspaper man, a frown on his face. Petersen's head was bare; his eyes had an angry glitter. He shook a finger at the Lone Wolf.

"This won't get you anywhere, Ranger!" he said harshly. "Nick Cates was only obeying orders!"

"Your orders?" Jim asked coldly. He

studied the man, trying to understand what was behind Petersen's antagonism. Was it fear? Or was the man used to being the power in Dry Gulch and did not like to see someone else take authority?

"Did you order Nick to try to gun me?" he added softly.

"Of course not!" Petersen's face was flushed. "But I did tell him to lock this place up. You didn't have to prod him into a shooting over it."

Hatfield's tone was short. "You've got the thing twisted, Petersen. Your man was doing the prodding. And I don't take too much prodding."

"I see!" Petersen snapped. "Well, the governor'll be in town soon. I'll bring this thing up with him. You know how he feels about the Rangers." A thin sneer twisted the newspaper man's lips. "The State police are his baby. When I tell him about the way you Rangers throw your weight around—"

"Save it for the governor, Petersen!" Jim interrupted bleakly. "In the meantime, keep out of my way!"

Petersen stiffened. A dark temper showed in his eyes; the grooves bracketing his mouth deepened. He nodded slowly, choosing his next words.

"I will, Ranger. But just remember one thing: I didn't send for you. And as far as I'm concerned, you have no authority in Dry Gulch!"

Jim watched him turn on his heel, his back ramrod stiff. The wind fluttered Petersen's long black coat about his thin shanks as he walked back along the sandy street.

CHAPTER V

Silent Kill

MARVEY HOLT was sitting on the cot, holding his head in his hands when the Lone Wolf looked in on him. He lifted his glance to the big man in the doorway and a humorless smile twitched his lips.

"Feel hungry?" Jim's voice was rough.

Holt shrugged. He touched his swelling jaw with the tips of his fingers. "Don't reckon I could eat right now anyhow," he muttered. "Got a headache, too. Damn it, Ranger, what did you hit me with, a club?"

Jim ignored the rhetorical question. "Who hired you to brace me, Holt?"

A glint came into the youngster's eyes; he said, "So you know me, Hatfield?"

"Nothing much good," Jim said drily. "A young punk with a fast gun heading up the wrong trail on a fast horse. A kid who happened to be on the right side of the law in the recent San Saba range fight and decided using a gun is the easier way to make a living." Hatfield's eyes had a cold contempt. "I'm still asking you, Holt, who hired you to brace me tonight?"

Marvey shook his head. "It was my own idea, Hatfield. I wanted to see if you were all I had heard about." He touched his jaw with his palm. "I found out—"

The Lone Wolf's voice was impatient. "You'll have a chance to sleep on it. I'll let you out in the morning. And I'll be with you when you buy a ticket on the morning stage out of here." He paused, eyeing the blood stain on Holt's thigh. "Reckon you need a doctor for that, Holt?"

The youngster's jaw was set in stubborn lines. "No. And I'm not leaving town, Ranger. I just got here."

"You're leaving!" the Lone Wolf growled. "I've got enough troubles here without a gun-proddy fool out to try his luck!" He closed and locked the door, ignoring Marvey's angry retort.

The sun had faded entirely in the interval he had been in the cell; the office was already gloomy. He had difficulty making out Benton's pipe stand on the spur-scarred desk, the tin of tobacco, the old dodgers which had gathered dust.

A tiredness weighed the big Ranger down as he stood there. He had come to Dry Gulch to see Tom Benton, but the

marshal had tried to kill him. The whole town was edgy, jumpy—and the antagonism he felt in Petersen was reflected in most of the faces he had seen. Why? What was he up against here?

Back in Austin there were rumors of the Baron and his desert empire. But the stories brought only amusement, a cynical tolerance. A harmless crank who wanted to secede eighty thousand square miles of desert from Texas.

But here the story was no joke, the threat out of the desert was real. It had Dry Gulch scared.

Jim touched the wiry bristle darkening his jaw and remembered that Goldy was still at the El Dorado rail and he shook his head at his forgetfulness.

The big stallion snickered at his approach, turning to eye him with eager lift of head. The Lone Wolf ran his hand down the sorrel's sleek neck. "Sorry, Goldy," he murmured. "I'll get you bedded down now."

The dust storm cast a premature twilight over the desert town. The hotel veranda was empty of loungers, a sickly yellow light stained the dirty windows. The rising wind scattered sand across the boards.

Jim pulled his neckerchief up to protect his face. Dry Gulch had changed in the half hour he had walked away from this building with Marvey Holt across his shoulder. It was now a ghost town, boarded up against the howling wind.

The Lone Wolf mounted and swung Goldy away from the rack. He headed

A TALL TEXAS TALE

LONE STAR SPRING-TIME

THE boys at our Texas Tri-Hard ranch were bragging about their favorite relatives.

Pike Heeny told about his Uncle Jake. Said the town was built around him, or at least that part of town where he spent most of his time, since the jail was right in the center of town.

Boswell Johnson had a brother that had four wives and was about to take a fifth when somebody discovered that, due to poor memory, he had forgot to get divorces from numbers one, two, three and four.

Bard Shakespong explained that his eighth cousin on his ma's side attributed his downfall to fast women and slow horses.

Ora Pancake claimed his fourth cousin by marriage met defeat by signing on the dotted line once too often. It wouldn't have been so bad had he signed his own name.

All this time old Herkemer Haines hadn't said a word. One of the boys finally asked: "Where do your ancestors spring from, Herk?"

"They come from Texas," said Herk, "and don't spring from nobody. They spring AT them!"

—W. L. Hudson

east toward the end of Main Street. The small cemetery on the rise beyond was hidden by the swirling dust pall, the towering canyon walls that shut off the high range from the Escalante loomed shapeless in the darkening sky.

Jim rode past the lighted windows of the Chronicle and was abreast of the sign before his slitted gaze made it out:

AMOS SELWICK, LIVERY STABLES

He turned in under the wide board sign and down a short alley flanked on one side by a warehouse and open lots on the other.

The big barn faced him, its door closed. He could barely make it out in the gloom; Goldy snorted his distaste at the howling, sand-laden wind.

Jim dismounted. The big door gave to his shove, rolling back on oiled overhead runners. The pale glow of a lantern spilled out, outlining the scarred board ramp.

Jim led Goldy inside. The wind skittered sand in after him, and in the stillness it sounded like the quick scampering of mice.

Someone stirred in the darkness beyond the reach of the lantern; a man's sleepy voice muttered, "Be right with you."

Jim pulled his neckerchief down from his face and spat grit from between his teeth. The hostler shuffled up into the light and Jim saw that his right arm was twisted and he carried it close in to his side. A rail-thin small man with deep furrows in a worn face and a dull glaze in his bloodshot eyes.

The Lone Wolf knew the type—probably a good enough cowhand until an accident crippled him. Then years of drifting, looking for odd jobs, trying to hold on to a pride that had nothing tangible to uphold it.

He came to stand beside Goldy; he ran his good hand along the big stallion's flank.

"Nice cayuse," he muttered. His breath smelled of cheap whiskey and the stubble on his chin was at least a good five days old.

GOLDY turned and bared his teeth and the hostler grinned uncertainly; he took his hand away and looked at Hatfield. "One man horse, eh?"

"Treat him gentle and he'll give you no trouble," the Lone Wolf answered. "Goldy doesn't take to a rough hand."

"I'll treat him with kid gloves," the man said. "Grain or hay?"

"Both," the Ranger replied. "And he'll stand a bucket of water."

He unsaddled Goldy himself and watched the man lead him into an empty stall just beyond the reach of the lantern hanging from a nail on the wall. Other horses thumped uneasily—and watching, Jim's idle thoughts held on this small shuffling figure thrust by bitter circumstance to eking out a living shoveling manure.

The hostler came back to join him. They stood in the small circle of light; the man leaned back against a loft support from which old harness hung. He was facing the open door where the wind was whirling sand like a circular curtain on the edge of the lantern light, shutting them off from the shadows in the yard.

"Helluva night," the stableman said. He fumbled in his bib overalls for a corncob. "Same kind of night Bob Crane was killed."

Jim was rolling a cigaret. He turned and looked sharply at the man, sensing something in his nervous tone.

"You knew Bob Crane?"

Judd Viers shrugged. "He used to come in here a lot," he said. "Liked to ride Nig over there," he pointed with his pipe stem toward a dark shape in one of the stalls. "Did a lot of riding for an Easterner. Claimed it was good for his health."

Jim considered the unspoken message behind this man's conversation. Crane was the man who was killed the night Tom Benton was shot. Had there been a connection?

"Looks like the riding caught up with him," the Lone Wolf observed drily. He cupped his match and brought it up to

his cigaret; his eyes had a cold green glint as he watched Judd.

The hostler licked his lips. He was studying Jim, trying to find his courage in this tall, wide-shouldered figure with the silver star of Texas on his coat. He glanced out into the stormy night—he rubbed his hand nervously across his stubbled jaw.

"I heard you're the Ranger Tom Benton sent for. The one they call the Lone Wolf —Captain McDowell's ace troubleshooter?"

"I've been called that," Jim admitted. He dropped his hands away from the cigaret, stepped on the wood match. "Why?"

"I'm just a bum," the man said. A pent-up bitterness broke through his fear. "Old Judd they call me. Old! Hell, I reckon I ain't a year older'n you." He wiped his mouth again. "I sleep up in the loft with the rats, Ranger. I shovel manure an' water the horses. I ain't nobody. But I see more than most people think, an' I hear a lot, too."

Jim waited, knowing how it was with this man, knowing he had to let Judd talk his courage up.

"I got a pretty good idea why Bob Crane was killed, Ranger. I been keepin' it inside me—ain't nobody in town I could tell. Not with Tom Benton the way he is now."

"Who was Bob Crane" Jim asked quietly.

"Claimed he was an Easterner out here for his health," Judd repeated. "Maybe he was. But he did a lot of ridin' for a sick man. An' they killed him the same night they got Benson."

"They?" Jim's tone was sharp.

"The Baron, or some of his bunch," Judd nodded. "Maybe you can figure out what this means, Ranger." He reached in his patched overall pocket, fumbling for something. "Picked this up outta the hay pile where Red Davis spent last night. Blind as a hoot owl, he was, and came in here to sleep it off. I saw him."

He cursed as the small black notebook he pulled out slipped through his nervous fingers. "Damn."

Jim bent swiftly to pick it up.

He heard the metallic twang from the darkness of the yard; something whistled ominously over his shoulder. He heard Judd gasp.

The Lone Wolf was crouched when it happened and he reacted with instinctive speed. He lunged away from the doorway, reached the lantern—a quick puff plunged the barn into darkness. Then he whirled, facing the yard, a Peacemaker making its abrupt appearance in his hand.

He saw no one. The storm blanketed the shadows in the yard.

Judd's body was a dark, writhing shape a few feet away from Jim. His dying movements, blind and soundless, sent a chill down the Lone Wolf's spine. Finally a rattling sigh escaped from the hostler and his movements ceased. The stillness which followed seemed harshly acute, broken only by the low moaning of the wind outside and the run of sand particles along the stable flooring.

JIM PACED to the door opening and listened. Somewhere a door closed. But it could have been anywhere—and it might not have anything to do with the man who had killed Judd.

He could prowl through town looking and finding nothing, and the futility of it brought a cold anger to his narrowed gaze. The killer was gone, vanished into the anonymity of this town, cloaked by the howling desert storm.

He put his shoulder to the door and closed it, then turned and felt along the wall until he touched the lantern. He struck a match and touched it to the hot wick. The yellow light sent the shadows dancing over the far walls.

Judd lay huddled at the foot of the support, harness tangled with him. An arrow protruded almost a foot between his thin shoulder blades. It had entered his chest and gone almost completely through him. The stableman lay curled up like a small boy asleep, his worn face

slack and strangely vacant.

Jim dragged the body over by the wall. He pulled the arrow out of the man and draped a horse blanket over Judd. Then he examined the slender, stubby shaft.

It was a replica of the one Petersen had shown him—the same type arrow that had killed Bob Crane.

But now Hatfield recognized it, and a steely light flickered in his greenish eyes.

There was a killer loose in Dry Gulch, a maniac who used a bow undreamed by the American Indian. A crossbow! Hatfield remembered reading about this deadly weapon in his college history courses. Used during the Middle Ages, its terrific penetrating power was capable of punching through armor.

But why a crossbow? A rifle hit harder and reached farther. Unless the killer wanted to inject the quality of fear, of the unknown, into his murders. And a crossbow made no appreciable sound, of course.

Yet why Judd? The man had indicated he knew something, but he had told Hatfield little the Ranger had not already suspected. Why had the killer waited until this moment to kill the hostler—and then it occurred to the Lone Wolf that it may not have been Judd the killer had come for. He remembered that he had to pick up the notebook Judd had dropped the moment before the arrow hit Judd.

He blew out the lantern before opening the barn door stepping into the yard. The wind buffeted him, filling his ears with sound. Hatfield pulled his neckerchief up over his face again and jammed his hat brim down over his eyes. He ran across the yard to the partial shelter of the warehouse and turned to look back at the barn.

It loomed up dark and shapeless in the night, but the Lone Wolf had a sudden picture of the target he and Judd must have made in the lamplight. And to a man who knew how to handle a crossbow, twenty yards would present no problem, even on a night like this.

The killer was probably long gone, but some inner caution nagged at Hatfield; he drew his Peacemaker and held it against his side as he edged along the warehouse wall to the street.

The wind blew free through the natural funnel of Main Street; the night seemed filled with a great soughing that smothered all other noise. Jim forced his way against the buffeting storm, feeling his way back to the El Dorado.

He started up the steps, conscious of a sign somewhere creaking harshly. Then the sound of footsteps grating behind him spun him around. His Colt muzzle levelled on the shadowy figure looming up.

The dark shape halted abruptly, warned by the cold glint of light reflecting from that ominous muzzle. A woman's high-pitched, near-hysterical voice asked: "Uncle Tom? It that you?"

CHAPTER VI

Tom Benton Takes a Hand

SURPRISE made its quick run through the Lone Wolf, when he holstered his Colt and stepped down to join the girl. A faint light penetrated to the bottom of the steps and he saw Ruth Dillman's white face under a shawl lift to him and caught the mixture of disappointment and relief in her eyes.

"Mr. Hatfield!" Her voice was quick, lifting above the wind. "I thought you were Uncle Tom."

"What's happened, Ruth?" Jim's voice was gentle.

"He's gone, disappeared from his room." There was panic in her voice; her body trembled. "He's got his guns—I think he's out looking for you, Jim."

The wind momentarily choked her; she gasped and tears came into her eyes. Jim took her arm. "We can't talk here," he said swiftly. "I'll take you home."

She shook her head. "Father's lunchroom is nearer," she mumbled through her shawl.

They crossed the street, fighting the wind. Yellow light outlined the lettering in the Butte View Lunchroom windows. Jim opened the door and followed Ruth inside.

Sam Dillman was alone. He was sitting on one of the counter stools, going over his books. He turned at their entrance, a worried frown creased his brow.

"Ruth! I thought you went home."

"Dad! Uncle Tom's gone." Ruth was walking toward him, shaking sand from her shawl. "I've been out looking for him and I ran into Jim—Mr. Hatfield, I mean."

"Jim sounds friendlier," the Lone Wolf said, coming up. "I like the sound of it." He smiled, adding quietly: "I can use a few friends in Dry Gulch."

Ruth turned to him, her eyes shining. "Uncle Tom talked a great deal about you, Jim. I feel I know you."

"You sure he's gone, Ruth?" Sam Dillman interrupted harshly. "Maybe he just went—"

"Mother and I checked everywhere," Ruth said. "He took his gun belts and the rifle from your closet. He must have crawled out on the porch—we found the window open and the curtains blowing—"

Sam shook his head. "But Tom's in no condition to be out. Doc Harrigan told him to keep quiet. Said something about pressure on his brain; he might drop any time." He turned to Jim. "I can't account for Tom's actions when you showed up, Ranger. He was waiting for you. Now—" Sam's tone was puzzled. "Now Tom's out to kill you."

The Lone Wolf shrugged. "I think I can handle him," he said. "You have any idea why he'd want to go out tonight? Besides—" Jim's voice held a wry note—"wanting to kill me."

Sam Dillman frowned. "Tom kept talking about something he had to get out of the office. Said it was from Bob Crane. I thought he was just talking. Doc Harrigan bandaged his arm and gave him something to quiet him. Then Ruth and I came to the lunchroom. My wife, Clara, is at home. I didn't think he'd try a thing like this!" He looked at Jim helplessly, a worried, tired man.

"I'll take a look around town for him," Hatfield promised. "I'll check the office first. Where else would he hang out?"

"Oro Grande, sometimes," Sam said. "But Tom wasn't much of a drinking man. Liked to play checkers with Amos Selwick and George Vollner at the stage office. George Vollner is district manager for the Desert Line Company," Sam added.

The Lone Wolf remembered the dead man in Selwick's Stables and thought, Amos ought to know. He said, "Where can I find Selwick?"

"Same place," Sam replied, frowning. "Amos never misses a night, he's a bachelor." He then gave directions.

Jim nodded. "Might as well drop in on them," he said. "I've got some bad news for Amos."

Sam closed his book and pushed it aside. He said: "Get some coffee, Ruth." He looked at Jim. "Bad news?"

The Lone Wolf told him about Judd. "Same kind of arrow that killed Bob Crane," he said. "Fired from a crossbow." He saw the incredulous look on Sam's face and he smiled grimly. "I know it doesn't make sense. But someone's dug up a museum piece, or had a copy of one made, and is using it. My guess is that it's all part of a plan to scare hell out of people along the Escalante."

He was remembering the notebook Judd had dropped as he talked; he brought it forth now. "Judd was going to show me this when he was killed," Hatfield said.

THE notebook was old and dog-eared and held only a half dozen strange names and addresses, most of them from the East. They meant nothing to Jim, nor to Sam, who looked at it over Jim's shoulder.

Folded in between the pages was an old, yellow clipping. There was no dateline on it, nor did the clipping include the

name of the paper from which it evidently had been taken. It read:

> Surrounded by a score of witnesses, Big Brad Morgan pistol-whipped Duncan Stafford today in a political argument which flared up over drinks in Clancy's Bar.
>
> Bystanders testified that Duncan Stafford came into Clancy's looking for trouble. Morgan was surrounded by a half dozen of his riders, but none of them took part in the quarrel which ensued.
>
> According to eyewitnesses, Stafford called the big cattleman a liar and a crook and made further remarks concerning the dubious beginnings of the Big M ranch. Stafford was quoted as saying, "I'll see you in hell before you're elected to Congress!"
>
> The enmity between Stafford and Morgan dates back several years when the Big M cattleman pushed through a bill in the State legislature allowing him to build a dam on the—

The clipping was torn at this point; it was not a recent tear. Jim pushed it over for Sam to read. He was frowning, pulling the fragments of this into focus.

The Brad Morgan mentioned in the clipping must be the present governor—the "Big M" as he was still called, still owned the Big M ranch along the Trinity. Morgan had put in a two-year term as Congressman, then had been elected governor of Texas.

That would put the date of the clipping at least six years away.

But why did a man like Red Davis, an itinerant typesetter, have this clipping in his possession. Why was it important to him?

Sam Dillman turned a puzzled face to the Lone Wolf. "Doesn't mean anything to me," he said slowly. "Never heard of either of the two men in the story."

"Morgan should sound familiar," the Lone Wolf said. "He's Governor Bradley Morgan, the man who's due in Dry Gulch day after tomorrow."

Sam pursed his lips. "You sure?"

Jim nodded. "Background's the same. Morgan still owns the Big M on the Trinity. He was elected governor four years ago."

"What's it all about?" Ruth asked. She had come to the counter with coffee cups; she stood facing Jim, her eyes a dark blue. The shawl was on her shoulders and the lamplight touched red-gold highlights in her hair.

"I'm not sure," the Lone Wolf answered. "I don't know why Davis would be carrying a clipping like this, unless it meant something to him." He folded it, tucked it between the notebook, and put it in his pocket. "But Judd thought it meant something. And he hinted that he knew why Bob Crane was killed. What did you know about Crane, Sam?"

The lunchroom owner shook his head. "Ruth knew him better than I." He turned to her.

"He was a gentleman," Ruth said quietly. "He had a polite way of speaking, not only to women. He was a quiet sort of man. Wrote poems, some of them were published in the Chronicle."

"Judd said he did a lot of riding, mostly in the desert," Hatfield said.

"I—think so. He took me riding a few times." Ruth smiled wistfully. "He was always the gentleman. And he was from the East, he told me about Philadelphia and Boston. Small talk, mostly. Only once did he talk of anything that meant something personal to him. He talked about a younger brother. I gathered he was worried about him. He said that Marvey was a different breed from him, that he didn't like the way his brother was living. A fast gun and a yen for a fast dollar, that's the way he put it."

"That all he told you about his brother?" Jim's voice was soft.

"That's all. Oh yes, he did say this." Ruth was frowning, trying to remember Bob Crane's words. "He said that if anything happened to him, his brother would show up. Marvey was all the family he had, he said." She looked at Jim, her eyes glistening, there was a sadness in her voice. "He said to tell Marvey he was sorry. That's all. He said Marvey would understand."

"Did his brother show up?"

Ruth shook her head. "No one's asked about Bob Crane since he was killed. We went through his personal belongings, he

lived at the El Dorado, but there was nothing there to identify him. No letters even."

Marvey Holt! A fast gun admittedly in Dry Gulch on his own—Jim took a deep breath. It could be. It could be that the San Saba gunslinger was Bob Crane's brother.

He said: "Thanks for the coffee, Ruth. I'll take a look for Tom. Don't worry about him. He's probably playing checkers with Amos and George, like he used to."

But as he stepped out into the howling night, the Lone Wolf wasn't so sure.

TOM BENTON stepped through the bedroom window onto the second floor veranda, ducked his head against the wind, and edged along the wall to the end of the porch. He leaned over the low railing and dropped the rifle on the yucca Clara Dillman had planted against the side of the house; he jammed his Colts snug into his holsters, and straddled the railing.

The wind tugged at him, hurling a thousand tiny particles of grit into his face. He let himself hang by his hands and then dropped five feet to the ground.

The impact sent a sharp pain through his head and he set his teeth against it. He found the rifle and tucked it under his left arm—the feel of it in his hands, added to the familiar weight of the guns at his hips made him feel better than he had in days.

He was through with just sitting and waiting. The big man who claimed to be Jim Hatfield was just another phony, sent to kill him. Benton's lips curled. This time he'd do the hunting.

But first there was something he had to find in his office. Something important. He didn't remember just what it was. But it was something he just remembered having hidden in his tobacco tin. All evening the remembrance had nagged at him. Something important, something Bob Crane had given him.

He kept to the back yards and empty lots, fighting the howling wind, knowing by instinct which way to go. He left the last building to cross the road to the law office he had occupied for almost ten years.

He found the door locked. Benton had his old key on him, but the new lock did not respond to his efforts. A snarl twisted his lips; he stepped back a pace and fired three shots into it. The wind whipped away the reports, smothering them in its own savage fury.

He put his shoulder against the door and now it gave. He stumbled across the threshold.

The office was dark, but Tom Benton didn't need a light to find what he was after. He crossed to the desk and fumbled for the tobacco can. He had removed the cover and was digging inside when he heard the voice, partially muffled behind the closed cell door.

"Hey, Ranger! Figgered you had forgotten me."

Benton stood still. There was someone in the cell—someone who thought he was—he turned, taking the tobacco can with him, and walked to the door.

On the other side of that closed door Marvey broke the stillness with brittle impatience. "Damn it, Ranger, I want to talk to you. About my brother—"

Benton stood undecided. He was still holding the tobacco tin in his hand, but he had forgotten why he held it. A strange trembling seized him. He dropped the tobacco can and put his hand on the door knob. But this room, too, was locked. He felt for the key which he always left in the lock when the cell was unoccupied, but it was gone.

Anger swept through him then in an unreasoning wave. He swung his rifle up and fired two shots at the lock. The slugs smashed against cast metal and whined off, he heard a man's sudden gasp of pain from the other side of the door.

Benton lifted his right foot and kicked the door in—he stepped across the threshold, his rifle muzzle threatening the figure doubled over against the wall.

Marvey was a darker bulk against the wall, but Benton's eyes made him out, the man's harsh breathing located him.

"Damn you, Hatfield!" The youngster's voice was thick with pain and anger. "You didn't have to—"

Hatfield's name was a primer, touching off the blind hate in Benton. He caught Marvey by the shoulder, yanked him away from the wall, shoved him through the door into the office.

The youngster stumbled, caught at the door framing, then fell forward to his hands and knees. Benton stood over him, breathing heavily; his head felt strangely light. It didn't pain him now.

"Who are you?" he rasped. "What are you doing in here?"

Marvey tried to get up. One of Benton's rifle bullets had torn through his side; it was not a serious wound but it was painful and was bleeding profusely.

"I'm Marvey Holt!" he muttered through clenched teeth. "Bob Crane was my brother."

"Crane?" Benton touched his bandaged head. Bob Crane? He had come here for something Crane had given him. Something important.

He wheeled away from Marvey, found the lamp on the desk, lighted it. He turned, his features lined and harsh in the flickering light. He walked to the tobacco scattered over the floor and knelt to pick up a folded piece of paper.

Marvey Holt was staring at him. "Benton," he said, wonderingly. "I thought it was Hatfield."

The ex-marshal whirled on him. "Hatfield ain't here! I know! I sent for him. But he didn't come. They sent someone else—some dirty hellion who calls himself Hatfield. They sent him to kill me. Because I know what's out there in the desert." His voice whipped up, wild and bitter. "Because I know how to find them!" He waved the paper at Marvey.

The San Saba gunslinger hitched himself to his feet. The man was crazy, he thought. That head wound of Benton's was worse than he had figured.

"Give me a gun, marshal," he said, thinking fast. He'd have to go along with Benton or wind up with a slug in his guts. "Give me a gun and I'll help you get Hatfield."

Benton's eyes narrowed. "You said you were Bob Crane's brother?"

Marvey nodded. The hand he was holding pressed to his side was turning red. "Didn't wanna disgrace Bob, so I took the name Holt. Came here because of a letter he sent me. He said he thought he could use a fast gun."

Benton nodded. He blew out the light and came back to Marvey. His voice was grim.

"If you're Bob Crane's brother we won't have trouble. It you're not—"

The wind was blowing through the open front door. The loose posters on Benton's desk had blown off. They swirled around the room like white fluttering ghosts.

"Get out!" Benton snarled. "I'll tell you where to go. Keep moving. I'll be right behind you."

CHAPTER VII

Find Me a Driver!

THE LONE WOLF was a half hour too late. He found the door open and sand gritted underfoot as he stepped inside the marshal's office. He lighted a kitchen match and found the lamp—the chimney was still warm to his touch.

The bullet-splintered doors told him what had happened. But the bloody hand print on the cell door framing puzzled him, as did the smudged prints on the gritty floor.

Tom Benton had obviously taken Marvey Holt with him. But why? And why had he shot him?

Tobacco was scattered about the cell door and the empty can lay in a corner of the office. But none of the marshal's pipes were gone.

Hatfield tried to puzzle out Benton's

moves, but none of this made sense. According to Sam Dillman, the marshal had come here for something. But Benton could not have known about Marvey Holt, nor could Hatfield understand what Benton planned to do with the youngster.

He blew out the light and went to the door. Tom Benton had not gone back to the Dillman house. Then where had he gone? It was no night for traveling. And yet—?

The Lone Wolf had a sudden hunch Benton had left town—and taken Marvey Holt with him.

Goldy reared his head over the stall side and whickered eagerly. Jim walked over and stroked the sorrel's muzzle. "Wish you could talk, fella," he muttered. "Might be you could tell me where Benton was headed."

Goldy tried to nuzzle up to him. He pushed the stallion away, grinning. "Better get all the sleep you can," he said softly. "I've got a hunch you're going to need it."

He could stand some sleep himself, he thought wryly. But he had one more chore to do tonight.

He went back to Selwick's Stables and knew he had guessed right. The door was still partially open, but now light made its dim rectangle across the ramp.

Hatfield drew his Colt as he went inside.

There was no one in the big barn. Only Judd—and Jim saw that the blanket over the body had been pulled back.

The black horse Judd had called Nig was gone. He could not tell what other animal had been taken, but it was logical to assume that Tom Benton would not be riding double on a night like this.

George Vollner chewed on the stump of his fat cigar and eyed the checkerboard with morose distaste. He was in the process of losing his fifth game to the fat man across the table, but it was not this which made him irritable. He could afford the fifty cents a game stakes.

Outside the office the wind rampaged. Sand filtered in through crevices. The lamp flame flickered and danced as if caught in the night's wildness.

Amos Selwick stroked his gray-shot chin whiskers. He had a business which paid him a living, and a natural disposition for physical inactivity. He was fat

and soft in a land of wire-hard men, but this did not bother him.

He said with bare hint of impatience, "You've got three moves, George."

The hammering on the door made him jump. He turned to face the front windows and apprehension made its brief glitter in his soft brown eyes.

George scraped his chair back and stood up. He was a short man with a solid, hard-muscled body, a sharp military mustache, ruddy cheeks. His brown suit fitted too snugly across his shoulders. He was thirty-five, only a few years younger than Amos, but he looked a lot younger and harder.

He took a Smith and Wesson revolver out of his desk drawer and walked to the bolted front door.

"Who is it" he growled.

"Hatfield! Ranger!" The voice came through the panels, hard and clear.

George stiffened. Panic appeared briefly in his hard gray eyes. Then he put a frown on his face and slid the bolt back. He pulled the door open and stepped back, his pistol held at his side.

"Come in, Ranger," he invited gruffly. "Helluva night to be out calling, though."

The Lone Wolf came into the office, a tall, wide-shouldered man with his neckerchief across the bridge of his nose. His green eyes made their quick survey of the room as he pulled the bandanna down. He took his hat off and slammed it against his knee.

George stood to one side of the door, still frowning. He saw the Lone Wolf glance at his gun and he made a short, disparaging gesture. "Didn't know who'd be calling, Ranger," he explained. "After what's been happening in town everyone's cautious."

Jim nodded. He put his gaze on the fat man at the table. "You Amos Selwick?"

The livery owner nodded.

The stage line manager slid his pistol back into his desk drawer and took a clean glass out of a side drawer. "I'm George Vollner," he introduced himself. "Join us in a drink, Ranger?"

"The name's Jim Hatfield," the Lone Wolf said. His voice was flat, without warmth. "I'll stay for the drink, and for some information."

VOLLNER rolled his cigar between his lips. His hand shook a little as he poured from the bottle that had stood on the table by the checkerboard. "We were talking about you, Hatfield. We need a man like you in town." He held out the whiskey glass. "Too bad you had trouble with Tom Benton. And with that hardcase who checked in at the El Dorado today."

"You forgot Nick Cates," Jim murmured, accepting the glass.

"Cates only got what he's had coming for a long time, far as I'm concerned," Amos chipped in. "I'm sorry about Tom though. He was a damn good town marshal until that bullet—"

Vollner filled in at Amos' pause. "Well, looks like you've taken over, Jim. Got things pretty well under control in town—"

"Sorry to disillusion you," Jim cut in coldly. "Things are way out of hand." He turned to Amos who was eyeing him with slack-jawed interest. "I've got bad news for you, Selwick. Judd's dead."

Amos blinked. He stared at Hatfield for a moment, then sagged back in his chair. "Judd?"

"Someone put an arrow clean through him, less than an hour ago," Jim said. "He was talking to me when it happened."

"Why?" Amos shifted his heavy bulk in the chair. "Damn it, Ranger, why? Judd was just a busted up bum. Didn't own anything and didn't harm anyone."

"Maybe he knew something of what's going on around here," Jim answered evenly. "And maybe the arrow wasn't really meant for him." He told them what had happened in the livery stable.

"I left Judd there," he concluded. "Covered with a blanket. No way to leave a man, though. I thought you ought to know, in case he had any next of kin."

Amos shook his head. He looked shocked. "I'm about the only kin Judd had."

Jim finished his drink and put the glass down on the table. "I've run into trouble since I arrived here," he said bluntly. "I haven't had a chance to catch up. Maybe you boys can fill me in on what's been happening around here? What's got this town scared?"

Vollner didn't meet the Lone Wolf's probing glance. He poured himself another drink.

Amos said, "Bunch of killers on the loose, Ranger. A crazy man who calls himself The Baron leading them. They raid out of the desert and disappear into it." He pushed his half empty glass aside. "Killed Judd, eh?" His voice had a sag in it. "Damn it, George," he turned to the stage line manager, "I've about had enough. If I can find a fool willing to buy my business, I'm clearing out!"

Vollner took the cigar stub out of his mouth and spat shreds of tobacco on the floor. He gestured to a squat iron box in a corner. "If I don't get that money out of here soon, I'll be out of a job," he muttered. "Got twenty-five thousand dollars in bullion in there, Hatfield. Got to ship it to Harrisburg by the 10th. But I can't find a driver willing to risk it, nor a man to ride shotgun."

Jim frowned. "Why not?"

Vollner flung up a thick arm in impatient gesture. "They're afraid of the Escalante raiders. Of this hombre who's been tacking up posters all along this end of the desert. The Baron."

"Any idea who this madman is?"

George shrugged. "Don't think anyone around here knows that, Jim. But whoever he is, the law can't seem to touch him. Sheriff Crowley took a posse out after them the day the Escalante bunch held up and robbed the Daylight Special just outside Concho. Went into the desert after them. Crowley had about thirty armed men with him. They got lost in the breaks past Iron Butte." Vollner lifted his shoulders. "Less than twelve men got back to town with whole hides. Crowley was one of them. He hasn't gone into the Escalante since."

Amos was staring vacantly at the checkerboard. "They've got a hideout in the Escalante," he muttered. "No one's been able to track them to it. Storms keep wiping out any tracks they leave."

Jim was thinking of the way Judd had died. Maybe the raiders did have a hideout in the desert. But one of them, the crossbow killer, hung out in Dry Gulch. It had to figure out that way.

He was turning to the door when an idea checked him. He faced Vollner. "You say you have twenty-five thousand in that safe you've got to ship to Harrisburg?"

George nodded.

"Find me a driver," Jim said. Little green lights were dancing in his eyes. "I'll see that the shipment gets there."

Vollner's mouth slackened. His cigar fell to the floor. "You?" he whispered. "When?"

"The sooner the better," the Lone Wolf replied. "Make it tomorrow!"

George shook his head. "Don't think I can find anyone willing to try it. Not even with you riding shotgun."

"Pass the word around town!" Jim ordered flatly. "And don't try to hide the fact that you'll be shipping that bullion!"

Vollner's eyes had a muddy tinge. "I can't do it, Ranger. Unless you sign a statement making you personally responsible for that shipment."

Jim nodded. "I'll be responsible." His voice was bleak. "Just get me a driver for tomorrow!"

AMOS STIRRED after the Big Ranger had departed. He shook his head. "I don't know, George. One man—what can he do? Even if he is the Lone Wolf."

"I quit believing fairy stories," George said. His voice was hard. He came back to the table and started to sit down.

But Amos said, "I've had enough tonight." His eyes had a wet shine. "Damn it, why Judd."

George Vollner stared at the checkerboard a long time after Amos left. He, too, was a bachelor and lived in quarters back of the office. He was an ambitious man—there was a time when he had been a junior partner in a big wagon outfit in St. Louis, and there had been a girl. . .

But he had wanted to get ahead too fast, he hadn't been content with being a junior partner. He wanted to own both the wagon outfit and the girl—and he lost both.

His name wasn't George Vollner. His real name was wanted in the state of Missouri for murder.

He walked over to the window and stared at his own dim reflection in it. He had come to a dead end in this hot stinking corner of Texas, but there was no place else he could go.

After a while he blew out the light and went into the back room which served as sleeping and living quarters for him. It was neatly furnished, it had taste, and the books stacked in the small walnut bookcase were those read by an educated man. Usually he read himself to sleep on the nights Amos left early, but tonight he was uneasy.

The knock on the bedroom door startled him, although he had been half expecting it. Still, he went back into the darkened office for his pistol; he was holding it as he unlocked the door.

The man came in with a rush of wind; he closed the door and leaned against it, a shapeless figure in the darkness of the room. Vollner turned to the lamp on the small stand by the bed, but the man's sharp voice halted him. "No lights tonight, George."

Vollner paused.

"He was here tonight?"

"Just left," George said. "A few minutes before Amos."

The figure was silent, unmoving. Then his voice broke the uneasy stillness. "Missed him tonight. He must have some guardian imp standing watch over his hide, George. I had him lined up; he ducked just in time."

"You killed Judd," George said.

The shadowy figure shrugged. There was another pause. "What did he want here?"

"Guess he wanted to see Amos about Judd." George's voice was tired. "Damn it, he's dangerous. He's not just another lawman, not like Tom Benton or that Federal detective, Bob Crane. And he's not the kind of fool Sheriff Crowley—"

"I know, I know," the caller snapped.

George's tone had a nervous edge. "Then do something! If we're going to pull off that stunt Thursday, we've got to get rid of him!"

"I can bring Jode Slade into town," the other said. "Two or three of the others. Slade's been wanting a chance to try his gun on the Lone Wolf."

"Slade's not good enough!" George stated emphatically.

The figure shrugged. "Then there must be some other way. And it's got to be tomorrow."

"Wait a minute!" George was frowning. "Hatfield's got something up his own sleeve. He wants me to get him a driver. Says he wants to ride shotgun on that bullion shipment I've got in the safe."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

The man against the door began to chuckle. "We'll get him a driver, George. And an escort, too."

George frowned. "Who'll do the driving? One of the boys?"

The other shook his head. "You, George. You'll drive—"

"Wait a minute!" George cut in harshly. "Why me? I don't fancy sitting next to Hatfield when he finds out he's been led into a trap."

"He won't have a chance to lay a finger on you if you follow directions," the shadowy figure snapped. "When you get to the fork this side of Iron Butte, take the cut through Dawson's Gulch. We'll be waiting in the live oak grove at the bend—"

"No!" Vollner's tone was firm. "I won't do it. Get someone else."

"Not even for twenty-five thousand dollars, George?" The man's voice was thin, amused.

George's breath sucked in sharply. "You mean—"

"All yours," the voice promised. "Hatfield disappears. You come back with a story. Who's going to call you a liar?"

George absorbed this in the momentary silence which followed. The weight of the man's words sank in sharply. A chance to get out of this hole.

A small TEXAS TALE

POLL VAULT

ONE of these national pollsters stopped a Texan to ask him what his conception of the average Texan was. The man grew reflective for a moment, then put his hand on the pollster's shoulder and said, "Son, there ain't no such thing as an average Texan."

—Harold Helfer

"Besides," the voice continued, "who'll be worrying about the bullion when we pull the other one off. Think of it, George! It'll be the biggest shock to hit Texas since the Alamo!"

George Vollner nodded slowly. . .

CHAPTER VIII

Gathering Storm

THE STORM blew itself out during the night. Just before dawn a rider dismounted on the shoulder of Iron Butte and climbed the steep face to a promontory facing the badlands.

He had made this trip before, and always for the same purpose. He found the big mirror in the rock cache and he waited for the sun to rise a little above the far misty rim of the desert, smoking a cigaret with stolid patience.

Finally he ground the butt under his heel. The mirror in his hand sent its flash of light across the gullied, desolate stretches of the Escalante—a long flash and then two quick ones. He repeated this several times. Then he replaced the mirror, smoked another cigaret. He was in no hurry as he climbed back down to his waiting cayuse. It would take Slade and the others a good three hours to get here. . .

At eight-thirty that morning Ruth Dillman came to the door of her father's lunchroom and gazed down the street. She had slept little last night and the strain showed in her face, the spray of freckles across her pug nose stood out more sharply than usual.

She had lived in Dry Gulch since she had come here a girl of ten—the brown and ugly hills surrounding this desert town had grown into her very life and she seldom noticed them. But now she was looking at them, wondering if they held, in some stony gully, her uncle's body.

There had always been a certain amount of violence in this mining town, but she had grown up with it. Only in the past year had terror cast its pall over her.

She had seen the lines deepen in her Uncle Tom's face, noticed the worry sharpen in her father's eyes.

They had called the Baron a crackpot when the first posters had appeared. But then the raids had begun, and the name was no longer taken lightly and people quit laughing. The terror had not been confined to Dry Gulch. It was spread all along the borders of this wild stretch of country called the Escalante because it sloped upward into the dry plateaus of Mexico.

She had the feeling that Tom Benton

was out there somewhere, hurt and lost and looking for something he wouldn't find. The thought brought a helpless feeling she could not shake off.

She had always admired and loved her uncle. He was a big man, strong and sure of himself, and he had laughed a lot. She had known him like this as a child, for Tom Benton had never married; he had lived with the Dillmans from the day they had come to Dry Gulch. Ruth had come to look upon him as a second father—and sometimes with more affection—for Sam was often preoccupied and harrassed and had little time for her.

It was Tom Benton who had taught her to ride, shown her the beauties of the desert, told her stories—

"I'll trade you pennies for your thoughts," a man's strong voice said.

Ruth started. She turned and looked into Jim Hatfield's smiling eyes. A big man, she noticed, looming over her and his presence stirred her sharply; she felt the surge of blood through her, almost as if there had been physical contact between them. Instinctively she brushed at a strand of damp hair over her ear.

"I'm afraid mine aren't worth trading," she said. "I was thinking of Uncle Tom."

The smile faded from Jim's eyes and his trail-tanned strong face went grave. "He's an old hand in this country, Ruth. I think he knew what he was doing last night."

Ruth straightened her shoulders. "I know. And yet, when I think of it, I can find no reason for him to do such a thing." She shook her head, as if in that way she could shake free of her worry. She lifted a hand to the desert. There was a clearness in the morning that made the distant mountains stand out like gray-blue etchings.

"Beautiful, isn't it? Hard to believe that anything so beautiful can be so cruel."

"I've found they sometimes go together," Jim said. The violence of the night had left its residue of bitterness in him and at this moment he felt the stir of a cold and unwanted cynicism.

Ruth Dillman reacted to it with a woman's instinct. She put a hand on his arm and her eyes were gentle, searching his face. "Uncle Tom spoke often of you. I've heard other stories. It's—" She hesitated, feeling tender and womanly and strangely stirred—"Are you happy, Jim?"

Her words probed a chink in his armor. Was a man ever completely happy? With or without a woman? He considered the meaning behind her question and the hint of promise in her eyes—and then he saw the long trails of Texas rise up out of the shadows of his future. He was not invulnerable to what this girl could mean to him, but the die had long been cast for him. He had chosen the iron-bound path of duty and for him there would never be any other way of living.

"No, not always," he answered slowly. "But there is more to living, Ruth, than personal happiness."

Her hand tightened on his arm, but the surge of blood in her receded; her smile had a touch of sadness. "I guess I'm just moody this morning, Jim. I've been worried about Uncle Tom—"

"A good breakfast might help," Jim said easily. "Funny how a full stomach sometimes can change a man's, or a woman's, perspective."

"I've had my breakfast," she said quickly. "But I'm sure you must be hungry. I'll have bacon and eggs for you before you finish your first cup of coffee." She turned in the doorway, her smile teasing now. "All men need someone to look after them, at some time in their lives."

"I couldn't ask for a prettier one," he agreed. "Make it four eggs, ma'am, and don't spare the bacon."

RED DAVIS was sober. And when he was sober he was a poor hand at the type cases. His hands trembled as he worked; his Adam's apple kept bobbing in his scrawny throat. He gulped like a fish out of water.

Phil Petersen came out of his office

with copy in his hand. "Set this up with a 48 point banner, Red. It's going to be our lead story—"

Davis started. He bumped his elbow against the bench and dropped the stick he held in his left hand. Type scattered over the floor.

Petersen faced him, his temper flaming. "What in hell's the matter with you? You've been jumpy all morning."

"I need a drink," Davis whined. "I'm no good without a drink."

"You're not much good drunk, either!" Petersen snapped. "I don't know why I keep you here."

"I—I need a drink," Davis repeated sullenly. He didn't look at Petersen, but his mutter reached the taller man. "And you need me all right."

They both turned as the front door bell jangled.

Petersen stepped away from the type cases. "Good morning, Hatfield," he greeted coldly. "What can I do for our new town marshal?"

"I want to talk to your man Davis," Jim said curtly. "I've got something he lost."

Petersen frowned. He called Davis over. "Ranger looking for you, Red."

Davis shuffled over, reluctantly, like a cur approaching another dog's bone.

The Lone Wolf held out the notebook Judd had dropped. "This yours?"

Davis started to put his hand out for it, then he drew it back. "No," he muttered. "Never owned a notebook."

Jim said: "Look it over, Red. You might remember having it."

Davis kept his hand behind his back; he shook his head. "Never owned a notebook, never lost one!" His voice was dogged; he glanced at Petersen in silent appeal.

Petersen stepped forward. "Where'd you get it, Ranger? What's in it?"

"An old newspaper clipping," the Lone Wolf answered.

Petersen held out his hand. "Mind if I look at it?"

"Not at all," Jim answered. He watched Petersen read the news item, studying the man's thin, arrogant face.

"Where's the rest of it, the clipping?" Petersen asked.

"That's all that was in the notebook," Jim replied. "Judd gave it to me last night, just before he was killed. He said your man here, Davis, lost it when he slept off a drunk in the barn the other night."

"Judd's a liar!" Davis shouted. "It ain't my notebook!"

"Judd's dead," Jim reminded him coldly.

Petersen handed the notebook back. "What's it mean?" he asked curiously. "What's all the fuss about? Far as I can make out it's an old news story concerning Governor Morgan and a Duncan Stafford."

"I was hoping Davis could tell me," the Lone Wolf said.

"I don't know anything about that notebook or the clipping," Davis snarled. He backed away from them, his face twitching. "Sure, I slept in Selwick's barn the other night. But I didn't lose that book."

Jim shrugged. "It doesn't take much nerve to call a dead man a liar," he pointed out. He turned to leave.

Petersen said, "I heard about Judd being killed from Amos Selwick this morning. I heard other rumors, too. I heard that Tom Benton's left town. That he broke into the law office, busted into that back room cell, and took that red-headed gunslinger with him."

Jim's smile was wintry. "You've been getting around, I see."

"It's my job," Petersen snapped. "The Chronicle comes out in two days." A sneer twisted his thin lips. "And I've got a front page story on you, Hatfield. Want to hear how it goes? Ranger Captain Bill McDowell's ace troubleshooter unable to cope with situation in town. Judd Viers, harmless cripple working for Selwick, killed under his nose by mysterious bowman. Ex town marshal, Tom Benton, helps strange gunman break out of jail. There's more, Hatfield. But that gives

you an idea of my front page." He rubbed his palms together. "Do you have any statement for the paper?"

Jim was almost at the door; he turned to face the publisher of the Chronicle, a bleak humor in his eyes.

"Sure," he said softly. "I've got a statement for you, Petersen. Put it in eighteen point bold face, boxed. Say that Captain McDowell's ace troubleshooter promises to smash the Escalante gang by weekend. The Baron's dreams of empire will die with him. Print that Petersen!"

The door bell jangled harshly as he went out. Petersen turned as the sound faded.

Davis was backed up against the flat-bed press; he cringed as Petersen started toward him. "I didn't tell him, Phil!" he cried. "I didn't tell him."

JIM HATFIELD was in the Oro Grande Saloon when George Vollner walked up to him. It was eleven-thirty.

The stage-line manager elbowed up beside the Lone Wolf and asked what Jim was drinking. He ordered the same, drank the first one fast, and ordered refills.

"I've got your driver," he said. "We can start any time after twelve."

"We?" Jim's tone was curious.

George flushed. "I've got to get that bullion shipment to Harrisburg," he reminded, "or I might lose my job. If you're willing to ride shotgun then I'm willing to drive!"

Jim smiled. "I see your point," he said. He held up his glass. "Let's drink to the success of it."

Vollner drained his glass. "Just for the record, Ranger," he muttered. "Why are you risking your neck on this trip?"

Jim shrugged. "A man can hunt a big cat for days and never find where he holes up. Stake some bait out though and the chances are two to one he'll have the big cat under his sights by nightfall."

"I see what you mean," Vollner nodded. He poured one more round. "Let's hope we see the big cat first, eh?"

CHAPTER IX

The Trap

THE SUN beat down over the Dawson's Gulch trail, pouring heat into the long deserted canyon gold camp. On each side of the narrow ribbon of road the scarred slopes rose, raw and ugly and speckled with old rock dumps.

Ten years ago a thousand men had worked these diggings and the town of Dawson's Gulch had flourished. Now little was left of the hopes and dreams of those thousand men except a few aging shacks and abandoned holes.

In the concealing shadows of the live oak clump at the bend of the road, where it dipped down to the deserted mining camp, four men waited with stolid patience.

One of them was Two-bit Jones, the half breed who had signaled from the top of Iron Butte. A small, wiry Indian-dark man who hung around the Oro Grande, an inconspicuous bum whose coming and going in Dry Gulch generally went unnoticed.

The other three were from the desert hideout of the Escalante raiders.

Jode Slade pinched the butt of his cigaret between his fingers and let it fall. He was a big-shouldered, powerful man with a dark, cruel face—a man wanted for murder in Dodge and Abiline and other trail towns. Most of the county sheriffs in Texas had dodgers on Slade in their desk files.

He was lounging in saddle of a big black stallion with a blaze face, and a star was pinned boldly on his black cotton shirt. A star set in a circle of silver—the badge of the Texas Rangers!

He had taken that star from a Ranger he had killed in a border town fight, but seldom wore it. But as he waited now he fingered it with cruel anticipation.

Two-bit Jones glanced at the high-rid-

ing sun. "They come pretty quick now," he said. He looked at Jode. "Boss say no kill Hatfield. Take him to hideout."

Jode scowled. He was getting tired of The Baron's orders, getting fed up with the man's grandiose schemes. The man was crazy, anyway. But he had proved useful in many ways.

He waited, hunched forward in saddle, with the cruel patience of a desert hawk. Two or three more good hauls and the Baron's dreams of an empire could hang.

The tough blond rider on his left suddenly straightened. "Looks like they're coming now," he murmured, and he reached down for the rifle butt under his leg.

Jode's voice had a lazy drawl when he said, "I'll handle it, Potter. My way!"

Jim Hatfield watched the road unwind ahead of the stage. The sun glared on the white alkali bottoms and heat waves shimmered over the trail. Ahead of them a jack-rabbit broke from the shade of a mesquite bush and went loping toward the brown hills.

The Lone Wolf sat loosely on the jolting seat, a hard, grim man with a rifle held easily across his knees.

The stage carried no passengers. None had been willing to book passage when it was known that they were hauling the bullion. For the past six months few shipments of value had been safe from the Escalante raiders.

Goldy trotted alongside, tethered by a ten foot rope to the luggage rail. Hatfield had insisted that the stallion come along.

"You must be sun struck if you believe those tall tales about tall Texans!"

If nothing happened on the way to Harrisburg, he did not want to be tied up waiting to get back to Dry Gulch.

He watched the road through slitted eyes, a big man seemingly unconcerned with anything that might happen. But all the way out of Dry Gulch questions had nagged him.

The whereabouts of Tom Benton and Marvey Holt bothered him. The marshal was in no condition to be out in this sun-blasted land. And why had he taken Marvey Holt along?

He had no answer to this, nor was he sure he had guessed right last night. Somehow he had the feeling that the Baron was after bigger game than this bullion.

Up ahead the road forked, the trail on the right led toward low, rocky hills and it seemed little used. An old sign sagged in that direction: DAWSON'S GULCH 4 Miles.

George Vollner started to swing the team to the right.

Jim turned his attention to the man. "This the regular road to Harrisburg?"

Vollner shook his head. He seemed tense, nervous—he had talked little since leaving town. Still, under the circumstances, it seemed natural.

"Rough road, but shorter this way," he said. "Goes through the old gold camp of Dawson's Gulch. There's water there we can use—won't be another watering place until we hit Harrisburg."

Jim settled back. He was watching the road closer now, a thin edge of caution narrowing his gaze. He had put himself up as bait for the Escalante raiders, knowing that the man who called himself the Baron could not let his challenge go by. He was gambling everything that this would bring the self-styled ruler of Deserta out into the open.

An oak clump shouldered the bend in the road ahead. Goldy suddenly raised his head and whickered warningly.

Jim slammed his foot on the brake and swung the rifle up. "Reckon we got company waiting," he said, and there was a grim eagerness in his tone. "Looks like the big cat's coming down for the bait."

HE STIFFENED, his hands closing hard around the stock and barrel of the rifle. The muzzle pressing hard against his ribs was definite in its abrupt warning.

"Drop the rifle, Hatfield!" Vollner's voice was nervously harsh.

Jim let the rifle fall. He had counted on this ambush. But he had made one mistake. He had not figured George Vollner in this at all.

He sat back, debating his chances on a sudden break for his hip guns and in the next instant knew it was too late.

"Stand up and clasp your hands over your hat!" George snarled. He had moved away from the Lone Wolf, but the Smith & Wesson in his hand was not any less deadly because of it.

Slowly the big Ranger obeyed.

The four riders pulled up by the stage. The two men with Slade held rifles levelled at Hatfield. The half breed, hanging back a little, kept his hand on the butt of the gun stuck in his waistband.

Jode Slade rested his hands on the pommel and ran his gaze over the Lone Wolf. The star on his shirt caught the sun and sent out sharp spears of light as he moved.

"So this is the great Jim Hatfield!" he sneered. "The man who gunned Nick Cates!" He spat deliberately into the ground at his feet. "Heard a lot about you, Hatfield, figgered you a plumb cagey hombre. Until I see you let a tinhorn like George stick a gun in yore ribs."

Hatfield was eyeing the star on the outlaw's shirt. Some of the puzzle was beginning to fall into place.

Jode grinned. "Handy piece of tin," he said, fingering the badge. "Fooled Tom Benton with it. Made him think I was the Lone Wolf." He laughed harshly, enjoying his joke—but he enjoyed it alone.

"You The Baron?" Jim asked.

Jode shrugged. "I ain't that crazy," he

sneered. "But don't fool yourself, Ranger. No one gives me orders I don't want to take."

George Vollner shifted impatiently. "Quit the gabbing, Jode. The Baron wants Hatfield out of the way. I don't know what he wants to do with him later, but he wants him alive. Until after the governor shows up, anyway."

Slade's eyes narrowed. "You giving orders now, George?"

Vollner caught himself, a flicker of fear appeared in his gaze. "I'm only repeating what Two-bit must have told you," he said. "Take his guns and let me go—"

The cruelty in Jode's eyes was naked now. "Why sure, sure, George," he said softly. He slid a bone-handled Colt out of holster and motioned at Hatfield. "George's in a hurry to get back to the Baron, Ranger. So step down—and step down careful!"

The Lone Wolf put a foot over the side, found the iron footrest, and came down. Slade edged the black up close to Hatfield. "Unbuckle yore gunbelts!" he said harshly.

Jim reached for his buckles. He saw Slade's body loom over him and he tried to duck. His hands flashed to his guns.

Slade's palmed Colt slammed across Jim's head.

The Lone Wolf's legs buckled. His right hand came up in reflex motion; he was falling as he fired the shot into the ground under the big black's forefeet.

Slade cursed as the animal jumped, nearly unseating him. He pulled the stallion's head around in a savage jerk that brought blood and his Colt swung around to the Ranger. But Hatfield lay face down on the road, unmoving.

George was gripping the reins, holding the frightened team. He looked at Slade, his uneasiness growing. "I've done my part, Jode. I'll be going."

Slade put his black across the road in front of the coach. "Going where, George?"

The blood drained from Vollner's ruddy face. He glanced at the others, seeking support and finding none in the hard faces.

"I made a deal," he said wildly. "I got Hatfield out here for what's in this box—"

"A nice deal," Slade agreed. "But I didn't make it. And besides—" he was grinning as he lifted his Colt—"it's too much money for—"

Vollner saw it coming. He made a lunge for the pistol he had laid on the seat beside him.

Slade's first shot caught him under the left ear—the second went through his neck.

The team lunged forward as Vollner's grip on the reins loosened. Slade crowded the leader, caught the animal's bit. He pulled the bay's head around, hard, and blood mingled with the froth on the animal's lips.

"Hold them!" he snapped to the tough blond Potter.

He rode alongside the seat and stepped up to the coach. He had holstered his weapon.

HE FOUND the iron box under the seat and his shoulder muscles bunched under his shirt as he pulled it out, set it on the seat. "You take it, Lefty," he told the stocky man who had ridden with him and Potter. "That big dun yuh ride can carry the weight for a couple of miles. We'll bury it an' come back for it later."

Lefty rode up close. The dun snorted at the extra weight and minced away.

Two-bit was eyeing the big outlaw; his hand was still on his gun. "I go now?" It was a question.

Jode shrugged. "Tell the Baron I'll keep Hatfield for him. But he better show up soon!"

Two-bit's face was impassive. He edged his cayuse away, keeping himself between the stage and Slade as he rode.

Goldy muzzled the Lone Wolf as the Ranger stirred. Slade came down and bent over Hatfield. He pulled the Ranger up, jammed a Colt against Hatfield's ribs. Jim's eyes were still glazed, but he reacted with sudden violence. His right

hand came up in a solid smash that rocked the outlaw back, he stumbled toward him, still only partially conscious.

Slade held the fall of his hammer with a horny thumb. He stepped aside and Jim fell and started to get up again.

"Real tough hombre!" he sneered, kicking Hatfield in the ribs. "I'll give you a chance to see how tough you are, later. Right now we're traveling! Get on that cayuse of yours!"

Jim's eyes cleared slightly as he got to his feet. He saw Slade through a blurred haze, but there was no mistaking the threat in the man's voice. He turned as Goldy muzzled him again.

His hands found the pommel, he pulled himself up slowly, settled in saddle.

Slade walked to the Peacemakers lying in the sand. Jim had dropped them when he fell.

He hefted them. "Nice pair of Colts," he sneered. He thrust one of them under his belt, tossed the other one up to Lefty.

"Let 'em loose!" he told Potter.

The team lunged away as the blond rider obeyed. Slade watched the coach take the bend and disappear, then he mounted the black.

"Let's ride."

CHAPTER X

Last Ambush

THEY REACHED the desert hideout at sundown.

It was an impossible place, one of those geologic freaks, in the middle of that rocky, waterless land of mesas and canyons and wind-carved pinnacles of sandstone.

The earth seemed to fall away in front of them in steep steps to a cliff-locked small canyon that held the first patch of green Hatfield had seen since Dawson's Gulch. A low adobe hut lay snugged against the cliff wall and horses grazed over a grassy area.

Slade pulled up close to the rim of the canyon.

A forty-foot rock guarded the trail into the canyon . . . to Hatfield's left the canyon rim was broken by jumbled boulders and cracks that split deep toward the canyon floor.

As a defensive position this desert hideout had no value. There was obviously only one way in or out of the canyon—by the narrow looping trail in front of them. Two or three men with rifles could bottle the whole crew inside that canyon trap, if they could find it!

Slade glanced at Hatfield. The Lone Wolf was slumped in saddle, seemingly disinterested. Potter and Lefty were slightly behind the Ranger.

Slade turned his attention to the rock looming over the trail. His halloo brought a man in sight on the rock—a slight figure with a rifle held carelessly across his thighs.

Jode waved. The guard lifted the rifle over his head in acknowledgment—then he seemed to stiffen, twist slightly sidewise, as if impaled on the sharp whipcrack that came from the jumbled rocks to the left of the trail.

For a moment surprise held the men bunched up on the canyon rim. The Lone Wolf reacted first. Goldy lunged forward at the dig of his heels, shouldering into the big black stallion.

Slade twisted too late. Hatfield hit him hard and they fell together, almost under the big black's feet. Jode's hands clawed for his Colts; he felt Jim's fingers close over the Peacemaker he had thrust inside his belt and desperation twisted him free.

He fired once as he was rolling and missed, then he sensed the canyon rim at his side and he caught himself, sweat beading his face. He pushed himself up to his knees with one hand; his right swung his Colt around toward Jim.

The Lone Wolf's Colt made its crashing report a split second sooner. Slade stumbled sidewise and fell with outstretched hands to break his fall. He fell a long way off the canyon rim.

Potter's bullet raked across Jim's back as the Ranger started to whirl away from the edge of the cliff. The blond outlaw was firing from the back of a frightened horse and his aim was bad. His next shot went wild.

Jim knocked him out of saddle just as the hidden rifle took a hand again.

Lefty slid forward on the neck of his dun. The animal snorted wildly and backed away from the steep trail—he turned and started to run back along the way it had come. Lefty's limp body bounced a few times before sliding off.

Hatfield turned to face the rifle. The sky was a pale green, rimmed in the west by the orange tint of sunset.

Marvey Holt appeared on the canyon rim from among the rocks. He was bent over, holding his side.

"Hatfield!" he yelled. He was a hundred yards from the Lone Wolf; he pointed with his rifle toward the cliff below. "Benton!"

Jim crawled to the canyon rim where Slade had fallen. A scattered volley of rifle shots sounded below. Marvey's rifle cracked in reply.

Jim's eyes searched for Benton. He found the marshal on a ledge halfway down the cliff face. Below Benton an overhang hid him from view of the adobe hut and the riflemen in front of it.

A sixty foot rope had helped the marshal reach the ledge. He was holding a wooden box under his arm as he inched along the ledge.

One of the riflemen made a break away from the house and saw Benton. He turned and brought his rifle up. It was too long a shot for Jim's Colt. Marvey was working the lever of his Winchester in desperate haste.

The first shot seemed to pin Benton against the cliff wall. He let the box slide slowly down to his feet. He clung with the fingers of his left hand to the jagged wall while his right hand slowly lifted his Colt from holster.

Two other men had joined the rifleman by the corral. Their shots slammed into the man on the ledge.

Benton jerked. His muzzle was pointed at the box at his feet—then the whole side of the cliff wall seemed to explode. Benton vanished in a mass of rock and earth that plunged down into the canyon hideout, smothering the adobe hut and the riflemen around it.

JIM FOUND Marvey Holt staring down into the darkness below the canyon rim. He was slumped against a rock, the rifle across his knees, his face was a pale blur in the swift-falling dusk.

Jim squatted beside him. "You should have told me you were Bob Crane's brother," he said.

Marvey grinned weakly. "You know?"

"I guessed," Jim replied. "After what Tom's niece, Ruth, told me. She knew your brother Bob. She said he told her you'd show up soon, but that if anything happened to him in the meantime, for her to tell you he was sorry. Just that, kid."

Marvey closed his eyes. He had told his brother to go to hell a long time ago, or did it only seem long?

"You be holy an' righteous an' work for peanuts!" he had sneered defiantly. "Risk yore neck as a Federal dick! Hell, I'll own half of Brazos County when you'll still be looking for money to buy yore next shirt—"

A kid bragging. How much did he have now? A hundred dollars in his pocket, and a gun.

He flexed his fingers and looked at the big man crouching by him. This Ranger had knocked whatever cockiness he had nurtured concerning his ability with a Colt out of his head.

"I figgered Tom Benton would head for the desert," Jim said. "But how did you find this place?"

Marvey shook his head. "Seems like a long nightmare, Jim. I think Tom was mad, out of his head. We spent last night in an abandoned miner's shack. I had lost a lot of blood from a slug I got in the side when he shot the lock off the cell

door. I was weak as a kitten, but he kept me tied up, even though I think I finally convinced him I was Bob Crane's brother. It didn't seem to mean anything to him. He kept muttering that he had to get them all—get them first!"

Jim frowned. "That box of dynamite? Where'd he get it?"

"That miner's shack where we spent the night," Marvey said wearily. "Back in one of the shafts. Maybe Tom knew about it beforehand, or he just ran into it. After he tied me up he went nosing around and came back with that box. He—he was crazy, Jim."

The Lone Wolf thought of Ruth Dillman, waiting. It was going to be hard telling her.

"He kept looking at a piece of paper he had," Marvey went on. "I think he had it hidden in his tobacco tin at the office. He said it was from my brother and that it told him how to get the Baron's hideout."

Marvey gestured weakly. "We're here. I don't know how we got here, Jim. I think we just stumbled onto it after we left Skull Rock. We were lucky. We spotted them changing guard on the rock up there, they were pretty careless. Heard them calling to each other before we saw them. Guess they weren't expecting trouble. Tom made us hole up in the rocks here—I think he wanted to wait for it to get dark. He never once told me what he wanted to do. Just before you arrived he cut me loose, tossed me the rifle and told me to cover him. Then he took his rope and—" He shrugged. "You showed up then and I took a hand. I swear I still didn't know what he was up to, Jim!"

"Tom Benton did," Jim said quietly. He was thinking that maybe it was better for the town marshal to go that way.

He straightened. "Not much more we can do here," he growled. "Can you ride?"

The redhead nodded. "Wound's opened up again, but I'll last. If we take it easy."

Jim glanced up at the first stars pinpointing the eastern sky. "We can take our time, kid. Long as we get to Dry Gulch before the governor."

PHIL PETERSEN left the crowd clustered around the El Dorado and crossed the street to the Chronicle. The mid-morning sun shone on his bared head, on the unruly mass of iron gray hair.

He walked stiffly, a man occupied with his thoughts—a man turned in on himself. He did not see the tall, broad-shouldered figure who stepped out of the Butte View Lunchroom and followed him.

Petersen took the long flight of steps alongside the Chronicle to his living quarters above the shop. He went directly to a trunk he kept in a small closet, unlocked it, picked up a crossbow and two arrows lying on top of old clothes.

He reached the roof through the skylight. The building's false front lifted a good four feet above the roof, shielding him from the crowd below. He crouched just below the parapet, a tall man nursing a hate six years old.

Brad Morgan would be rolling into town any minute now. Governor Morgan. The special coach would pull up in front of the El Dorado and he would step out. He would be a plain target for the weapon Petersen held in his hands.

A silent kill! Long before that crowd realized what had happened he would have hidden the bow again and mingled with them around Morgan's body!

He waited, nursing his hate. Then he heard the shouts from below and he knew Morgan was arriving. He straightened slowly, lifting the ancient crossbow above the parapet.

The voice behind him had a familiar ring. "I wouldn't try it this time, Stafford."

He stood stiff, as if that voice had nailed him against the false front. It couldn't be. Two-bit Jones had told him what had happened on the road to Dawson's Gulch! It couldn't be Hatfield, he thought.

Below him the coach, flanked by a half dozen riders, was pulling up by the El

Dorado. The crowd moved in around it, but Petersen saw none of it.

"Slade's dead!" the voice said. "They're all dead. It was a crazy dream, Stafford, your dream of an empire."

"When—did you—find out?" The words came hard, bitter, from the tall man's lips.

"I wasn't really sure," Hatfield said. "The clipping Davis lost, something George Vollner said, before Slade killed him. But I wasn't sure, until I picked up that half-breed in the Oro Grande this morning. He didn't expect to see me, so he talked. We picked up Davis, too." Jim's voice was cold. "He wasn't hard to convince."

Petersen whirled. Jim's shot smashed into his shoulder as the crossbow twanged sharply. He twisted along the parapet, dropping the bow. He crouched like some wild animal at bay, his right arm dangling. . . .

Jim said: "You'll live to hang, Stafford."

Duncan Stafford, alias Phil Petersen, alias The Baron, shook his head. Jim was walking toward him when he heaved himself up and over the parapet and plunged down into the street.

The Lone Wolf walked to the parapet and looked down on the crumpled body. Across the street, in front of the El Dorado, Governor Morgan, a big man in black broadcloth, was just getting out of the coach. He was twisting, looking across the street, trying to make out what the commotion was about. Part of the crowd was already streaming toward the Chronicle.

Hatfield shrugged.

He picked up the crossbow Stafford had dropped and started back for the skylight.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

PANHANDLE SLAUGHTER

A hard-riding, fast-shooting Jim Hatfield novel

By JACKSON COLE

and

RAINBOW RIFLES

An exciting cow-country novelet

By RAY G. ELLIS

Trouble At Taylor's Pass

By EDWARD F. CARR

Will's brother Jeb was a wild one, but not really bad—or was he?

THE metallic summons of the angle iron at the back of the ranchhouse sent a shudder through Will Stevens. The young rancher threw down his shovel and straightened his long, lean back, hating the thought of going in to dinner. He would rather go on chipping fence holes in the hard and stony earth than sit through another bitter wrangle between his older brother Jeb and his father.

Reluctantly Will made his way to the ranchhouse and into the big kitchen. His father, a tall, angular man, sat ramrod stiff in his chair at the head of the table, grimly spooning his coffee. Jeb's place was still empty, as it had been last night at supper and this morning at breakfast. Will was worried about Jeb not coming home, but for the moment he was relieved that his brother wasn't at the table, for he could see that the black mood lay heavy on his father.

With a sidelong glance at Angie, his fifteen-year-old sister and his junior by four years, Will straddled his chair. His mother's reddened eyes and the tight set of her pale lips told him that she had again been taking Jeb's side against his

As Frank Laird swung the rifle on Jeb, Will's hand hit his empty holster

father—asking patience, understanding for the raw energy that lashed her oldest son, for his wildness, for his running around with shiftless ne'er-do-wells, like the Lairds and the Simpsons. But Jonas Stevens came from a long line of ministers, book-reading men, and he sat rigid in unyielding displeasure.

In the course of the silent meal Will noticed his mother suddenly stiffen, her spoon frozen in midair in her thin fingers, her head cocked to some sound. Then he too heard it—the beat of hoofs breaking the hot noon silence. There was urgency in the staccato flurry of sound.

"Maybe, it's Jeb," Angie said, and started to push back her chair.

"Girl, you finish your eating," Jonas Stevens ordered. His eyes burned black fires above the stern line of his rigid cheekbones.

Why do they have to fight and make us all miserable, Will thought. Each right in his own way, and both bull-headed wrong. Why can't one of them give in a little?

The desperate beat of the hoofs thudded louder. If it was Jeb, why was he riding so hard? Had he gotten himself in real trouble, like his father had sworn he would? Will watched his mother glance fearfully out the window.

The hoofbeats came jarring into the yard and up to the house and stopped. Will watched his mother and sister hardly breathing in their chairs. His father started spooning the coffee to his thin lips as though it were gall.

Footsteps thumped across the porch. Framed in the doorway was Clem Beard, their neighbor to the north. He stood there, a thin wraith of a man, working his dusty hat in his hands and wetting and rewetting his sun-cracked lips. When he spoke it was to Jonas Stevens.

"They got your Jeb," he said breathlessly. "Got him and the Laird brothers holed up at Taylor's Pass."

WILL watched his mother push a thin wisp of graying hair off her damp forehead, and he saw the sadness well up strong in her eyes. His father kept spooning his coffee, not looking at Clem Beard.

"What for? Who got Jeb?" Angie asked tremulously.

Clem Beard kneaded the brim of his hat in his bony fingers. "Held up the bank in Largo and killed a teller, so they say. Posse's got 'em holed up in the old Taylor cabin and are trying to flush 'em out."

Will saw his father fix his mother accusingly with his black look as though it were her fault. The boy thought of Jeb, high and handsome and laughing, flowing over with the zest of living, afraid of nothing. He wasn't one to flush easy. Sheriff Terringer would need all the posse he had.

"Just thought I would ride over and let you know," Clem said, shifting his feet and looking down at the floor. The excitement had drained all the fiber out of his voice and his words wheezed like a high wind over dry leaves.

"We thank you for your trouble," Jonas Stevens said, still without looking at him. But there was no gratitude in his voice; it was cold as the river rocks at night.

Staring down at the table boards, Will listened to the tired shuffle of Clem Beard across the porch and the melancholy screech of dry leather as he forked into the saddle.

"What are you going to do, Jonas?" Will heard his mother ask.

His father pushed his black hair back on his high forehead in irritation. "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done," he said with grim finality.

The Scriptural quote seemed to shake Will's mother like a hand.

"Aren't you going to do something for him? You're his father," she cried, and her voice rasped with bitterness. "You never gave him the understanding he needed. You are to blame, too, Jonas Stevens." In her anger Martha Stevens rose up out of her chair.

Will watched his father stare grimly at

his plate. "I will have no business with transgressors. Let he who takes up the sword perish by the sword."

"Our Jeb never robbed or killed!" Martha Stevens screamed. "I'll never believe it!"

Will thought of Jeb, more like a giant than a man in limb and energy. At the end of a day of branding or riding fence, he still had energy for an evening of wrestling or a foot race—anything to sap the boundless vigor in him. Pranks maybe, and not so harmless either, but not robbing or killing. Crazy wild like a loco steer, but Will knew there wasn't any meanness or real badness in him.

And Will felt a kind of guilt, too. He was the quiet one like his father. The more fault Jonas Stevens had found with the wild ways of his older son the more pronounced became his tacit approval of his younger son. Will had sat by as the gap between his father and Jeb widened, neutral and yet not truly neutral, for the quarrel had promoted his own importance in the affairs of the ranch. And Will sensed that he should have done something more to bring them together before matters had come to this turn.

"He's your boy, Jonas," his mother was pleading. "Right or wrong, he needs you, needs you desperately now."

Jonas Stevens sat stone-like in his chair. "As ye sow, so shall ye reap," he intoned.

Will Stevens knew too well the granite spirit of his father. He sensed that his mother's pleading was falling on deaf ears. His father in his stubbornness would sit there, adamant and withdrawn, till they packed in Jeb's body trussed over his saddle. That's the way it would end.

"Father, we ought to ride up there," Will said. He felt his feelings for his brother flowing strong in him.

His father fixed him with his black eyes. "Go up and see for yourself the terrible wages of sin."

There was no sense in further talk. Will looked a last appeal at his father, got out of his chair, gave his mother's hand a sudden squeeze and left the room.

He buckled on his new gun belt and took down his Winchester, then saddled up the roan and headed the big mare toward Taylor's Pass. Pushing her hard, he followed the arc of Willow Creek past the beaver dams and began climbing the knobs that terraced up into Swayback Ridge.

When he started up the Ridge proper, he could hear the guns firing above. It was slow fire, ominous in its deliberate timing, reverberating down the mountain in desultory echoes.

THE angry whine of the bullets sent a shiver through Will. Each blast up the ridge could mean the end of Jeb and leave a wound in the hearts of his family that would never heal. Will thought back ruefully over the quarrel, all based on misunderstanding. The family had always before been so closely knit. How bitter his mother would be if one of those whining pieces of lead killed Jeb!

As the roan worked higher to the crest of the ridge, Will heard a burst of sustained fire, and then the whine of bullets faded out and the mountainside became ominously still. Had they gotten Jeb? Was it over? Was he too late?

When the roan gained the wide saddle of the pass, Will caught a glimpse of Taylor's old cabin in the rocky clearing. Just below the clearing he pulled off the trail. Back in the stand of fir trees he saw a huddle of men around Sheriff Terringer.

Will neck-reined the roan up through the twisting avenue of trees. As he rode up to the group, he saw Terringer break off talking. There were eight or nine men in the party. They turned and looked at him suspiciously, animal wariness in their eyes. He noticed Tom Saffron, Sig Hubbard, Rig Lewis, and Hoss Mission right off. The violence of their natures showed in the truculence of their faces. They were the kind of men always spoiling for a fight, born with a lust for killing—pro-

viding they could hunt in packs, with long posse odds on their side.

Will noted old Jim Parson, arthritis and all, the excitement of the chase in his pale, rheumy eyes, here to be in on the kill. And Will wondered that Sheriff Terringer had considered letting Sig Hubbard stay with the posse in view of Hubbard's personal hatred for Jeb, which he'd carried since the day Jeb had thrashed the trouble-maker to within an inch of his life.

Terringer thumbed back his sweated Stetson. He rubbed his matted copper hair and took a step forward. "Will, I'll trouble you for your guns till it's over."

Till it's over. Will felt himself stiffen in the saddle. "Jeb didn't rob any bank," Will said with conviction that surprised him. "I know my brother. Talk to him—if he's in there. You know he ain't the lying kind."

Terringer shook his head wearily and palm-smeared the beads of perspiration on his forehead. "They ain't in any talking mood." He looked significantly at the bloody bandage on Bob Ellis' arm, then shifted his stern eyes to the blood caked along Sig Hubbard's scalp line. Grimly he stepped forward. Slowly Will handed down his Winchester and then his belt gun.

"Mind you stay out of the way," the lawman said. He turned his stocky form and trudged back to the posse. "Remember now, shoot where I told you, boys, and nowheres else. If we cover the whole cabin, we're gonna get 'em."

Will swung off the roan and watched the men move eagerly up to take positions at the timber's edge. He went cold when he heard them laugh and make talk just as if they were on a cougar hunt. Numb inside, he saw the men circle out, crouch low, belly up to the last cover, snake their rifles over logs, around trees and rocks.

When the firing cut loose Will stared hard at the cabin in the clearing. He could see the yellowish puffs of dust in muzzle blast between the logs where the chinking had fallen out. The smoke kept curling from different logs and Will knew that in the cabin they kept changing their firing positions.

A bullet zinged on a wild ricochet overhead. Will backed off with the roan and tethered it downslope. He crouched low and moved closer up to the line of firing. Behind a stout fir he knelt low, irritated by the acrid smell of gun powder drifting back, and thought desperately of what he could do before a bullet found its mark and his family would be split forever on the bitter remembrance of Taylor's Pass. He wanted terribly to take some kind of action, but every line of thought led him up a blind alley.

Then during a pause in the firing, Will heard a voice yell from the cabin. The fire of the posse slackened and then stopped. Silence closed in on the clearing, and the smoke drifted thinly in the silence. Terringer and his men looked from one another to the cabin.

Another shout came muffled from the cabin. At first Will couldn't make out the words. The second time he made out what the voice was saying: "Hold your fire. We're coming out." The voice was too high in its pitch, too thin and scratchy for Jeb's.

"Hold your fire!" Terringer ordered his men. Then to the cabin he shouted, "Come out with your hands hoisted high!"

Have they hit Jeb? Will wondered. He moved forward several trees. There wasn't any movement from the cabin. Then the door pushed open and hung askew from only the top hinge.

BLACKIE LAIRD came out first, gingerly, hands up high. His brother Frank followed, holding his left shoulder. Will could see the red streaming through the fingers of his right hand. After a few hesitating steps the Lairds loped across the clearing. No one else came out of the cabin past the door swinging crookedly on the top hinge.

Will pictured Jeb lying in there on the rough planking in a pool of his blood.

Terringer's shot pattern had paid off. Or could it be that Jab wasn't with them?

At the timber line Terringer got to his feet. The Lairds looked over their shoulders back at the cabin and kept moving past the edge of the clearing through the screen of trees. Terringer stopped them just below where Will was crouching. The posse, holding their rifles at the ready, bunched in around them.

Blackie Laird, breathing heavily, fear in his eyes, looked apprehensively around the group. He reminded Will of a coyote cowering in a trap. The whites of his eyes showed wildly in the black hairiness of his bearded face. "Jeb Stevens is in there, right beneath the floorboards under the table. Shoot right beneath the table, plumb—"

"It's him that shot the teller," Frank Laird broke in, his bony face grimacing in pain. "He made us give up and say he wasn't with us in there, so he could get away by hiding beneath the floor and sneaking out after dark."

"Run right in and shoot through them floorboards, like we say," Blackie Laird urged. "Do it quick. Said he ain't gonna be taken alive, and you know him when he's riled."

"What—" Terringer tried to break in.

"Just go in like you was searching the cabin, like he expects. Then just fire through the floor, under the table." Frank Laird spoke excitedly, trying desperately to be convincing.

"And if he's in there waiting, he'll pick us off like elk coming down for bottom grass," Tom Saffron said suspiciously.

Will moved in closer. "Sheriff Terringer, you gonna take the word of a Laird? They was born lying." He gave the pair a withering look as he spoke the words.

"You keep a gun on us and shoot us both if it ain't jest like we said," Blackie Laird whined, his voice quavering in its intensity.

The sheriff looked from the Lairds to Will. His tiredness showed in the indecision that clouded his squinting eyes.

"Let me go in and talk to him. He'll come out with me. Hear both sides," Will pleaded.

"He said you ain't taking him alive. Some of you'll get it. You know Jeb Stevens. It's him that killed the teller. Git him like I said." Blackie Laird spoke more quietly, with almost a hush in his voice.

Sheriff Terringer looked tiredly up at the cabin.

Sig Hubbard regripped his rifle and stepped toward the clearing. The lust of killing and his hatred for Jeb Stevens showed plainly on his blood-caked face. "No sense in taking chances," he said to the hesitating lawman.

Then abruptly, as though fearful that Terringer would object, Hubbard broke running out into the clearing. Saffron followed right behind him. Will saw their backs moving across the clearing and all that he could picture was them firing through the floorboards at Jeb. What a way to die!

Terringer was making inarticulate noises, his ruddy face working with irritation. It was no time for words. Will started running out of the timber across the clearing after Hubbard and Saffron.

He heard Terringer shouting behind him. He didn't make out the words, nor did he try to, but the rasping anger of the harsh voice carried authority. He saw Saffron and Hubbard stop, turn in their tracks, saw the animalish disappointment on their faces. Running hard, he sprinted past them.

At the cabin door, he looked back and saw the two men still standing there, heard Terringer, now in full voice, shouting orders. Not waiting to distinguish the words, he ran into the cabin.

"Jeb, it's me—Will," he shouted at the floor boards. "We got to talk."

He flung the loose jointed plank table aside, knelt down, and put his fingers in a knot hole in the timber. The sound of sudden movement under the floorboards made him pause.

"It's me—Will. Jeb, it's Will."

WILL felt the boards move under him. He moved back quickly and saw the planks erupt and fall back upended. Jeb scrambled fast up out of the hole in the floor, dirt and cobwebs on him, his eyes full of wild surprise.

"How'd you know I was here?"

"The Lairds said you was, told Sheriff Terringer, said it was you who killed the teller, said they should shoot you through the floorboards cause you swore you wasn't gonna be taken alive."

Will looked inquiringly at his older brother. Anxiously he waited for a denial from Jeb. But the big man said nothing. His deep set eyes seemed to take fire in the sweaty grime of his face, but he said nothing. He sleeved the sweat off his face and moved to the door.

"They down in the timber?"

"I told the sheriff you'd come down with me and talk. What they said ain't true, is it, Jeb?"

"Let's get down there."

"None of it true, is it?"

Will started to move out the door.

"They'll expect you to come down without your gun, Jeb."

With an angry jerk Jeb unholstered his gun, flicked the cylinder open, flipped the cartridge out of the slot under the hammer, and tucked the gun inside his shirt under his belt. Without a word he moved out of the cabin, kicking the hanging door off its hinge.

Will felt a cold stone in his stomach. Was it true? Had Jeb killed the teller? Full of misgivings he started after his brother. He had to almost run to keep up with Jeb, who strode boldly across the clearing.

As they came up to the timber line, Terringer and the posse with the Lairds in front of them stepped out from the trees. Jeb strode right up to them. Without any preliminaries he yelled, "Laird!" and sprang at Blackie Laird, diving hard with lowered head, and threw the man off his feet.

Caught by surprise, the posse pulled hurriedly back from the threshing men on the ground. As they did so, Will saw Frank Laird snatch old Jim Parson's rifle out of his hands and swing the muzzle on Jeb, who was now on top of Blackie Laird, his big-knuckled hands clutching at the muscular column of throat. Instintively Will's hand slashed to his holster, but it hit empty leather. In his tension his throat gave out an incoherent gutteral yell.

The blast of the shot close by made him jump. Sick, Will focused his eyes on Jeb and waited for the bulging arms to grow slack, for him to slump off Blackie Laird. Instead he saw Frank Laird tilt forward, totter and pitch down onto the rifle that he pulled in and clutched against him.

Like a bucket of cold water, the shot ended the wild fury that possessed Jeb. He left off choking the older Laird and slowly got to his feet. He stared at the still figure of the man on the ground and the rifle in his hands. With open gratitude his eyes swept the group for the man who had saved his life. The men looked at one another. No one acknowledged the shot.

There was a movement in the trees off to one side. Will caught his breath. It was his father stepping out of the trees. He had come after all. Knowing how his father hated violence of all sorts, Will knew what a sacrifice this action meant for him.

Jonas Stevens came on toward the group, his old Sharp's carbine in his hand, the "devil's tool," as he called it. Will saw his father and Jeb just looking at one another. Neither of them said anything, but much understanding passed in that look.

KNEELING over Frank Laird, Sheriff Terringer shook his head, and handed the rifle to Jim Parson, who took the weapon sheepishly.

"You said he was a liar," Terringer said to Jeb, nodding to Blackie Laird.

"I was on my way back from Charlie Ransom's when I seen them beating up a streak. I yelled at them, but they didn't

pass no mind, just kept riding hard. I thought they was asking for a race, so I give chase. I got up to them, and it wasn't till then I saw you swinging out of the timber below Grayson's place, hot behind us. You boxed us in, and we holed up here. The lead was flying before I knew what it was all about, and a man just can't step out and argue with a flock of bullets."

Jeb paused. He looked more at his father than at the sheriff. "They told me how it was—them holding up the bank. Said they didn't want to get me in on it. When they gave themselves up when Frank got hit, they was going to say there was no one else with them. You was to search the cabin and find it empty like they said, and I was to hightail it out of here after dusk."

Will looked at his father, but Jonas Stevens was looking down contritely at the ground, as though he were praying.

"Where were you first thing this morning?" Terringer asked Jeb.

"Over at Charlie Ransom's. Stayed the night. Wrestling all last evening. Decided to stay over."

"We'll ride over and check your story," Terringer said, and he started down for the horses.

Will knew the story would check out, just as his instincts had told that Jeb was incapable of robbing or killing. The sheriff could save himself the ride.

When they were in the saddle, Will watched Jeb nose his horse in alongside his father's, reach out and take his father's hand. The way his father put his hand on Jeb's shoulder, Will knew that they were now united by a trial that neither of them would soon forget.

Will nudged his roan in on the other side of Jeb and patted his brother's sweat-grimed back.

Jeb turned and winked at him, as in the old days, and Will thought of his mother and Angie and the happy relief that would be theirs when the three Stevens men rode into the ranch yard, shoulder to shoulder.

WHAT GOAL, PARDNER?

Which do you hanker for, cowboy,
When you near the end of the trail—
The girl in the kitchen, pardner?
Or the bar, with your foot on the rail?

Morning is over the mountain,
For the sky in the east is pale.
Will you go to your loved one, pardner?
Or the bar with your foot on the rail?

—Oliver Bassett

THE RAZOR

By

HAROLD HELFER

José didn't know just how wicked a razor in the hands of a prisoner like Mario Felinga could be!

JOSÉ knew, of course, he should have reported the condemned man's request for a razor to the chief warden as soon as it was made. And, as a matter of fact, José actually had started down the stairway to do so. But something kept pounding away at his mind each step of the way: 2500 pesos. That's what Mario Felinga had offered him for the razor.

José did not continue all the way down to the chief warden's office. Instead he stopped off at the guards' recreation alcove, turned the coffee boiler spigot and sat down to a table with a lukewarm cup of the murky brown beverage. This time he did not grumble to himself about the lukewarmness—he did not even notice it. He kept thinking about the 2500 pesos.

That was a considerable amount of money. There was much he could do with it. Marry Angelina, for instance. There was no question about Mario Felinga having the money. All the big bandits managed to secrete money into their cells one way or another, no doubt hoping to bribe their way out with it.

Of course, Felinga had been unable to do that. He had annoyed the Governor of the province too much with his mocking, bravado-like ways. No warden or guard would dare consider such a bribe overture under the circumstances. But this was different. This was not a request for freedom. This was for a razor—the very opposite.

It was obvious what Mario Felinga intended to do with it. He meant to cheat the hangman's noose. Well, what difference did it make whether they strung him by the neck to the elm tree in front of the prison or whether they found him in his cell with his throat cut? True, the people would be denied a spectacle but they would be compensated by the sensation that would be caused by the unexpected twist. None of this hurt anybody—and it would make José 2500 pesos richer. Think of that—2500 pesos, in his hands, all at one time!

Of course, José would hate to lose his job as guard over this. That is what caused him to hesitate really. If it should be found out that he had supplied the razor, he might, as a matter of principle, be discharged.

In the end, it was thoughts of Angelina

that finally decided José to let the condemned prisoner have the razor. Not only because this meant that he would have enough money to marry her now, but there was another reason too. She had developed a kind of fascination for the bandit, almost as if he were some sort of glamorous hero. If this Mario Felinga were hung in the traditional way, this feeling in Angelina might linger. But if the supposedly dashing Mario wound up with his throat slit by his own hand, it would have a different effect—for this was a sordid and rather cowardly way to exit, nothing romantic about it at all.

Of course, if Felinga should be so foolhardy as to try to slash his way to freedom with the straight razor—so much the better. José was going to be in the guard convoy that escorted the condemned man to the elm tree. He would be ready, the instant the bandit made a false move José would whip out his pistol and shoot him down like a dog. Then Angelina would know who was the better man. It was José who would be the hero. Everyone would be talking about him. His picture no doubt would be in the paper too, perhaps even right on the front page.

It was a silly infatuation that Angelina had developed for the bandit anyway. You would think, grizzled, dirty and rather wild-looking as he'd become since his capture, he would have little attraction for women. But no, because he had the reputation for derring-do and being a great adventurer—and because he was known as a "ladies' man" too—Angelina seemed to regard him as someone magnificently romantic. She would spend many hours conversing with him from his window cell.

Even after José had given the bandit the straight razor and had the 2500 pesos safely tucked away in a pocket, he continued to sit in the alcove by himself with a cup of lukewarm coffee to brood over. The more he thought about it, the more he wished that Felingo would make a break for freedom with the razor. José could see himself stepping forward, staunchly and unflinchingly, and mowing down the bandit with his blazing pistol, while everyone looked on in terror, awe and admiration.

Of course, the odds were that Felinga intended only to cut his own throat. He was bound to know he didn't have a chance to break out with the razor. If his intent was escape, he'd have bargained for a pistol. No. Felinga, notorious bandit that he was, must know that the game was up for him and so had decided to take his own way out.

IN A few minutes it would be all over with. The whistle proclaiming the execution would sound any second now, José, along with some other guards, would converge on the condemned man's cell in order to accompany him to the site of his doom. Only in this case, of course, there'd be some gasps and there'd be a sprawled out body on the cell floor, blood splattered all around.

He wouldn't look like such a dashing figure then! What did women see in him anyway? To José, the bandit, with that wild-growing half-beard on his face, seemed almost like an ogre. Yet Angelina—and all the other women—kept coming up to his window cell. They'd had to keep a guard posted there to make sure nothing underhanded took place.

Well, women were silly. The outlaw gave them a little patter with a glib tongue, assumed a foolish bravado pose and the females swooned all over themselves. José had even overheard Angelina tell the bandit that she was going to mass this morning to pray for him. This had brought a flush to José's cheeks. After all, she was supposed to be his, José's, girl. And it hadn't made him happy at all to catch a glimpse of her a little earlier making her way to the site of the execution with her head held proudly high and in her finest black dress.

Well, it would make the final denouement that much more startling and effective. Instead of some semi-god heroically

striding across the stage in a thunderingly dramatic finale, they'd find him a deflated blob in a sniveling, cowardly little sideshow. Then, maybe, Angelina would appreciate him, José, at last and realize what a sterling fellow he was after all.

When the whistle finally sounded, it almost jolted José out of his skin. But he had himself firmly under control seconds later. After all, this was something to which he had been looking forward. This was the end of the drama, a sordid anti-climax for the supposedly romantic figure of a bandit—and a rousing climax for José, now a man of means, with the pretty Angelina all his own.

José moved down the corridor now with a firm, resolute tread. It did not displease him to see that he was going to be the first guard at the condemned man's cell. It would make his role that much more significant, being the one to discover the body in the cell. Perhaps, as a result, he would get his picture in the paper anyway.

"Well, I see you're on time."

These words caused José almost to freeze in his tracks. Not because of their mocking tone but because they came from Mario Felinga, in his cell, a few feet away.

He hadn't taken his life after all! José could see his face now, up against the bars. As he drew up even with him, José could see he was beaming. And something else: that he was clean shaven!

The desperado was feeling his jaws and chin with delight. "There's nothing like a fresh, smooth face," he declared, his eyes sparkling. "The ladies, they love it. And I couldn't disappoint them in my final exit, now could I? I appreciate the loan of your razor very much—you'll find it on the shelf over there."

José felt the blood pounding hotly in his head. He actually moved his hand back for his gun—he could say Felinga had lunged at him and he had had to shoot him down. But José never brought the gun forward. It was too late. Some other guards were coming down the corridor now.

Five minutes later it was all over with. They said that Mario Felinga died with a chipper smile on his face. José never saw it. His eyes were on Angelina. There was a look of intense soulfulness about her that he knew he could never induce in her. He had lost to the condemned man after all. Even with his 2500 pesos, even if she married him, José, with bitterness, he knew that she would go on thinking of him as a dull, weaselly individual.

Love and Adventure Ride the Range

in Our Companion Magazine—

RANCH ROMANCES

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by J. L. BOUMA

Rawhide

HE STOOD braced in the doorway of the day coach vestibule, the clatter of wheels in his ears, and he gazed across the broad reaches of the valley in the murky afternoon, and thought, so that's where Dave was killed.

That's where someone shot him.

His name was Jim Shannon. He was a tall man of twenty-seven with heavy bones, a muscular man with a broad bony face and stern eyes, and he wore a knee-length canvas coat over his dark suit. He had tugged the brim of his hat down against the strong wind, and now he looked ahead past the curve of the rails and saw the frame buildings of Caribou huddled at the foot of a mesa.

The train began to slow down and the reek of coal smoke and the musky odor of cattle swirled around

Range

One beautiful woman urged Shannon to fight, another to keep the peace, but he wasn't a man to be told what he should do

him. He looked down on a deep river bed where brown water raged, the carry-off of recent rains in the mountains that rose against the blustering sky. The Cedar River, he thought, remembering what Dave had written him concerning this country. The Rawhide Range, a jagged hump twenty miles long, formed the southern rim of this valley.

Shannon turned abruptly and went inside. The train had stopped now and again since daybreak to drop off passengers, and now only a drummer and a woman shared the coach with him. Shannon had noticed her particularly because she had smiled at him more than once during the journey. She had a tall voluptuousness, her face was dusky, with a sensuous mouth and large dark eyes. Her dress was wine-colored velvet, with a tight, low-cut bodice. She wore a leghorn hat on her sleek black hair that had been gathered in a heavy bun low on her neck. Her face held a knowing, amused expression, as though she contemplated the world with inner laughter, a quality that had stirred Shannon the moment he had first noticed her. As she noticed me, he thought, and smiled.

Now, seeing that she was having trouble lifting her suitcase down from the overhead rack, Shannon moved beside her and murmured, "Allow me," and took it down for her.

She half turned against him, her hand on his arm.

"Thank you so very much," she said softly.

"My pleasure," Shannon murmured, and went on to his seat, taking with him the subtle scent of perfume and a picture of disturbing black eyes and full lips that had quirked at their corners when she smiled up at him.

He lifted his carpetbag down from the rack and leaned forward as the train jolted to a stop. The stock pens on the siding were crowded with bellowing steers, and riders were driving the animals up ramps into the cattle cars. Fall sell-off, Shannon thought. As he stepped from the coach, he wondered if the woman who had written him about Dave, this Iris Elder, was here to meet him.

Shannon moved slowly along the platform where men were unloading the baggage car. A slim Mexican youth in a wide-brimmed sombrero met the woman from the train and walked ahead of her carrying the suitcase. Shannon followed them down the steps and watched them cross over to a gleaming carriage; and he was looking around when a hoot of jeering laughter caught his attention.

A dozen men in range garb stood idle by the stock pen across the tracks, and Shannon saw that their laughter was directed at an elderly man who shuffled by without looking at them.

One of these men—a thick-bodied fellow with massive shoulders—shouted roughly, "Your scrubby cows can damn well eat dust, Elder! Hat beef comes first!"

The old man turned angrily as though to answer this taunt, but then his shoulders slumped and he shuffled on without a word.

The thick-bodied man laughed. He made a sly gesture at a rider who had just left the pen; he gave a jerk of his head and the rider grinned and spurred his horse forward.

Shannon, seeing what was about to happen, shouted, "Watch it, Elder!"

The old man turned a startled face and gave a frightened yell as he tried to dodge; the next instant the running horse struck him and smashed him against the railings of the pen.

The rider jerked his horse to a stop, yelled, "Watch it, grandpaw!" and rode out of sight around the pen.

Shannon, his face darkening with quick anger, dropped his carpetbag and ran forward. The old man was moaning with pain, and his right leg had a crooked look to it.

As Shannon bent over him, he heard the sound of running feet. The cry of a girl reached him. "Uncle Dan!" She crouched at Shannon's side, a blond girl

in jeans and a buckskin coat. "How is he? Is he—" Her tone held a frightened pleading.

"His leg's broken." Shannon moved his hand gently along the leg, feeling the sharp lump below the knee. "Pretty bad. Is there a doctor close by?"

"His own damn fault," a heavy voice said, and Shannon got to his feet and looked at the sneering face of the thick-bodied man, who stood with his legs spread, a bottle dangling from his hand. The man shifted his gaze to the shocked face of the girl. "That fool uncle of yours should know better than to step in front of a running horse," the fellow growled.

Shannon said, "It was your idea, mister. You're the one that staged it."

THE fellow's eyes ripped across Shannon's face. One of the men behind him guffawed and said, "Watch him, Rintoon! He looks plumb dangerous to me."

Rintoon made a gesture with the bottle, then took a slow drink, his gaze never once wavering from Shannon's face. "You better watch how you speak to me, you hear?"

"Please—" The girl rose quickly and shook her head. "I'm sure it was an accident, so please let's not have any trouble."

Shannon gave her a sharp glance and saw that she was quite frightened. Rintoon said loudly, "If he wants trouble it's here waiting," and he took a belligerent step forward.

Disgust and anger flared all through Shannon. He looked at Rintoon's sneering face and knew he had met the man before, in a hundred bunkhouses and barrooms, bullies for the most part, that either you had to fight or ignore—if they let you.

Shannon made his mouth shape a deliberate line of contempt, an answer to Rintoon's challenge that packed more authority than words, and a surge of rage swept across the fellow's face. He dropped the bottle, grunted and charged, swinging. Shannon had felt it would happen, for Rintoon had made his brag and had to back it up or lose the respect of his men.

Now, as Rintoon came within range, Shannon struck twice. They were quick, battering blows that packed weight and assurance. The left jarred Rintoon on the temple, and the right nailed him full on the side of the jaw. He went to his knees and gazed at nothing with stunned eyes. Blood ran from his mouth and there was a lopsided look to his face, as though it had been twisted out of shape.

Shannon stepped back and waited quietly. When Rintoon lunged awkwardly to his feet, Shannon stepped in and caught him high on the arm with both hands and whirled him around and slammed him up against the stock pen, scattering what men were standing there. They formed a half circle, carefully watching.

Rintoon came at Shannon a third time, and with a sudden burst of rage Shannon slapped his face with all the power of his arm and shoulder. Rintoon uttered a grunt of protest, and a flicker of fright showed in his eyes. He was moving in a half circle to get around Shannon when a horseman rode up, saying sharply, "Here, now! Stop it, Rintoon! You men, get back to work!"

He reined up and swung down, a high slab of a man, taller than Shannon by four inches, with a baked, hard-fleshed look to his long-jawed face. His eyes glittered strangely as they swept over Shannon, then shifted to Rintoon. "I've warned you once about starting trouble, and I don't mean to warn you again. If you can't keep your hands to yourself and the men busy, I'll damn well find me another ramrod."

"Hell, we was just getting started, boss," Rintoon said sullenly. He showed Shannon his outraged eyes and hitched at his gunbelt to get his conceit back. Then he picked up the bottle, took a swig and spat it out. "You make good whiskey taste like vinegar," he told Shannon, and tossed the bottle away and walked off without looking back.

Shannon shrugged. He noticed that the Mexican youth and the woman from the train were standing by the carriage, watching. Her gaze held his for a moment in an appraising sort of way, before it settled on the tall man who had stopped the fight. It gave Shannon the strange feeling that she was comparing them, choosing between them perhaps. Now the tall man returned her gaze and smiled mockingly and made a gesture of touching his hat. He was not alone in watching her, Shannon noticed. The blond girl, who was kneeling beside Elder, regarded the woman with stiff-lipped dislike. She reddened when the woman gave an amused laugh and turned to enter the carriage.

Now the tall man looked down at the girl and said with an edge of impatience, "What happened here, Miss Elder?"

"I'm not sure. But I think it was an accident."

"It was no accident," Shannon said shortly. "That fellow Rintoon as much as told a rider to run the old man down."

The tall man's gaze flattened on Shannon. "I'm Henry Durrant. I own Hat and know my men, so don't tell me one of them ran Elder down deliberately."

"Why," Shannon said mildly, "that's exactly what I am telling you."

"Please, I'm sure it was an accident," the girl said quickly, and broke off, her eyes wavering in confusion under Shannon's steady stare.

He said, "If you're Iris Elder, I'm Jim Shannon. I think we'd better get your uncle to a doctor before we do anything else."

"Of course." She pointed out a yellow clapboard house beyond the depot. "The doctor lives there."

"Would you get my bag, please?"

Color came back to her face then, and she showed Shannon a quick smile as she rose and walked away. Durrant regarded Shannon with new interest. He said, "Sorry this happened, Mr. Shannon. Here, let me give you a hand."

He leaned over and grasped Elder by the shoulders and half lifted the moaning man, and Shannon said sharply, "Not that way! For all we know he's busted up inside!"

Durrant straightened, and his mouth stiffened with quick anger. Then he shrugged and forced a smile. "I suppose being an old army man you know best," he admitted.

Shannon showed him a brief, expressionless glance before he went over to a stack of fence rails he had noticed at the side of the depot, and he was thinking, there's one that knows about me. Well, there's no reason why he shouldn't. I suppose Dave spoke of me to any number of people.

He returned with two poles, took his coat off, pushed the poles through the sleeves and then buttoned the coat so that he had a make-do stretcher. Durrant spoke to one of his men, and the fellow came over to lend a hand. As they started toward the doctor's office with the stretcher between them, the carriage drove past, and once again Shannon saw the dusky face of the woman smile at him from under the leghorn hat. This time, he found himself smiling back.

A FEW minutes later he stood at the window of the doctor's waiting room, and he was thinking about Dave when a small boy ran into view and turned up the walk. The boy opened the door and said in a treble voice, "I'm looking for a man named Shannon, mister. Is he here?"

"I'm Shannon."

The boy fumbled an envelope from his shirt pocket. "A lady told me to give you this," he said, and hurried away before Shannon could question him.

Frowning, Shannon opened the envelope and took out a note. He held the cigar he was smoking between thick fingers and read:

Dear Mr. Shannon:

Please do not accept any offers you might receive for the sale of your ranch until you have first spoken to me. I'm staying at the

California Hotel and will be in all evening.

Sincerely yours,
Cora Hill

P.S.
I shall regard it a personal favor if you keep silent about this.

Shannon studied the bold lines of the signature. Cora Hill, he thought, and suddenly remembered that Dave had mentioned her in his letters. He put the envelope in his pocket as the door opened behind him and Iris Elder came in and said that her uncle had two fractured ribs as well as a broken leg.

"I'm sorry," Shannon told her. "And believe me when I say it was no accident."

"You don't have to keep saying that!" she answered sharply. "It's talk of that sort that causes resentment and leads to trouble."

He looked at her. She had a slim loveliness, her face was heart-shaped, with large gold-flecked eyes the same color as her hair. Her cheeks reddened when he said in a dry voice, "Was it talk that led to the trouble at the stock pens?"

"I just think it's better to forget what happened," she said irritably. "But Dad'll be upset. He and the crew are due with a herd this afternoon. Uncle Dan rode in early to find out if we could load our cattle before dark. That's why he was at the stock pens."

Shannon nodded. "Miss Elder, I want to thank you for handling Dave's funeral, and for all the rest you and your father have done for me," he said, thinking it was time to change the subject.

She smiled, then. "Thanks aren't necessary. After all, Dave was our nearest neighbor. He spoke of you often. I'm only sorry that you two didn't see each other for—how long was it? Three years?"

"A little over two years. I saw him in Texas not long before he moved here."

"I know. You were in the Rangers, weren't you?"

"I got out a month ago and was looking around for something else when I received your letter."

She half smiled. "'Looking around for something else.' Dave said you always had itchy feet, and I guess that proves it. A hitch in the army, three or four years of prospecting in Mexico, then the Rangers. Will you ever plant your roots, Mr. Shannon?"

"Jim. I suppose I will, yes. Up to now, I depended on Dave to sort of keep the home fires burning. He practically raised me, you know. I scarcely remember my folks, only an older brother who somehow managed to keep me out of mischief and saw to it that I learned my three R's."

"He was a fine man," she murmured, and Shannon looked at her sharply and wondered if there had been anything between her and Dave. It was doubtful, though. Dave had been pushing forty, and this girl couldn't be much over twenty. Besides, it was Cora Hill Dave had written about so often, even to hinting once or twice that she might end up as Jim's sister-in-law.

Shannon sighed and went to the door and threw his cigar in the street. He turned back and said abruptly, "Outside of the fact that Dave had been shot, neither you nor the lawyer, McGovern, mentioned any further details. What have you to tell me about Dave's death, Miss Elder?"

She bit her lip, then said quickly, "Why don't you ask Mr. McGovern? Since he was Dave's lawyer, he should be able to tell you all about it."

She spoke in the way of a woman who needs to avoid an unpleasant task, and Shannon reflected that she had no stomach for anything that touched violence. He felt an odd sympathy toward her at the thought.

"Or you might see the marshal," she went on. "His name is Tanner, and he has his office in the same building where Mr. McGovern is located, right across from the bank."

"I will see them both."

"Dad and I'll be staying in town tonight, and if you like we can meet at the hotel for supper around seven."

Shannon smiled. "Seven it is, Miss

Elder." He picked up his bag, put his hat on and went out.

As he turned on the main street a sudden gust of wind flattened his coat against him. The sky was a shifting mass of ominous clouds above this town of false-fronted buildings. Approaching the corner, he saw the sign—Robert McGovern, Attorney at Law—creaking in the wind above an inside staircase. To one side was the marshal's office. Shannon entered.

The stringy man with the turkey neck who sat behind the desk whittling on a small chunk of white pine, blinked at him with eyes the color of dirty ice. He grunted and leaned back, the block of pine in one hand, the knife in the other. Curled shavings covered the desk. He held the block of pine at arm's length as Shannon put his bag down.

"I figured to carve me a horse," the marshal said. "Dunno, though. Beginning to look more like a cow." He shifted in the chair. "Something for you?"

SHANNON introduced himself and Marshal Tanner offered a limp hand and allowed it to be shaken once before he drew it back. "I reckon you're the feller that took Rintoon down a peg at the depot," he said. "Heard he had it coming."

"Then you must have heard about what happened to Elder."

Tanner nodded absently. "Too bad. Feller his age has got to watch his step."

Shannon showed him an annoyed stare. Then he spoke of Dave. "I want to know exactly where and how he was killed."

"Well, he was found in his yard with a bullet in his back. That's about all I can tell you, except that the sheriff drove down from the county seat and looked around. Didn't find a thing, so he went on back home."

"No suspects? No one who might have had a reason to drygulch Dave?"

"Well, now, your brother was well thought of, Mr. Shannon. If he had an enemy in the world, I never heard about it."

Shannon's mouth hardened, for Tanner's attitude told him all he needed to know about the man. The marshal was a fixture in this town, as much of a fixture as the oldsters who whittled and chewed tobacco in front of the saloons, and his only concern would be to keep his job with a minimum of effort.

Shannon said, "It still follows that someone had it in for Dave. Was he mixed up in trouble of any kind? Range trouble? Anything like that?"

"Well—" Tanner said, and sighed. With a reluctant gesture he swept shavings from his desk to the floor. Then he opened a drawer, spread a map on the desk, and motioned Shannon to stand at his shoulder.

"This here's a map of the county," he said. "As you can see, this valley takes up most of it, mountains the rest. Here's the county seat, down south here. Here's Caribou." He moved a gnarled finger across the map. "Up here along these creeks in the Rincons, you'll find a few homesteaders and three or four small ranches. There's a settlement of sorts up in here, and a logging outfit in the mountains about here, but they've done closed down for the winter. I'm telling you all this so's you'll get a picture of the country in your mind."

"What's that settlement called?"

"Pine. Now here's the Cedar River. She flows along here below the Rincons. Your brother's place—your place now, I reckon—is up here between the river and the hills. Elder is located below you, and Johnson neighbors him."

"Where's Hat located?"

"Clear across the valley up against the mountains. Hat and the Bar-H and then Denro's place." He gave Shannon a sly glance. "Get the picture? Six outfits all told, three on each side, facing each other across the valley."

Shannon frowned. "Who owns all this land in between? The way it looks, half the valley's not spoken for."

Tanner chuckled. "More'n half. All of it belonged to a feller named Coleman,

who ran his beef under the Hatchet brand."

"You mean he owned it all?"

"I didn't say that. Outside of his original homestead, it is, and was, open range. Coleman claimed the rest, is all. He was king around here, son. Took what he wanted and kept the smaller outfits from spreading out. And either they minded him or he ran 'em out altogether."

"What happened?"

"Coleman sold out. He'd made his fortune, so last month he sold all his stock and moved to Laramie, where he built himself a big house. Left everything, all these miles of grass and water, enough to stock 20,00 head or more of cattle. 'Now the rest of 'em can fight over it,' he told me, and had himself a good laugh." Tanner laughed himself at the thought. "Yessir, he was king around here, but he's gone now."

"Did he sell his original homestead?"

"That's something I wouldn't be knowing."

Shannon looked at him. "All right," he said. "But what does all this have to do with Dave getting shot?"

"I didn't say it had anything to do with Dave's death," Tanner said. "Hell, I was just showing you the map, is all." He folded the map and put it away and leaned back. "Yessir, now here's these small outfits I was telling you about, and not one of 'em but what can use extra grass, especially with winter about due. Here's all this government range free for the taking. Now when Coleman moved out, the rest of 'em knew that they would have to either sit down and split that range six ways like gentlemen, or end up fighting each other for every blade of grass. But most of 'em didn't want to fight, so when Dave moved to hold a series of meetings and get the business settled so's everyone would be satisfied, they up and agreed. It sort of made him their chairman, so to speak, and that's the way they wanted it.

"Dave had it all figured out. Each outfit was to get what grass he needed for what beef he was running and expected to run for the next two years. If Durrant, say, had a thousand head on hand, he was to get a bigger chunk of that range than Denro, who only runs a few hundred head on his spread. Good idea. Anyhow, they held their first meeting at Elder's place, and from what I heard they didn't get far, even though the majority was behind Dave." Tanner glanced out the window and said in a softer way. "That was his last night alive. Johnson found him with a bullet in his back next morning."

Shannon took a gusty breath. "Who was against Dave's plan? Was it Durrant?"

"Son, I got enough worries without adding to 'em."

Shannon said, "Thanks," in a dry voice, and went over and got his bag. Tanner's voice stopped him as he reached the door.

"You selling out or staying?"

"Why?"

"On account of if you sell out you got nothing to worry about. But if you stay you'd better see that you wear your hat right. And try and keep your troubles away from my doorstep, huh?"

The marshal reached absently for his carving, and Shannon said, "Tanner, I'm thinking a cow might be better than a horse for you at that."

"Huh?" the marshal said.

"A horse might throw you or kick you, but a cow'll never give you any trouble. Besides, a cow gives milk."

He closed the door gently on the marshal's startled face, and turned up the stairs to McGovern's office. . . .

WHEN he came downstairs later it was dark, and rain splattered on sidewalk awnings and the ponies along the hitch racks stood with lowered heads and wore wet saddles. Shannon found his way to the California Hotel, registered and asked for the number of Miss Hill's room. It was just six o'clock. In his room he unpacked, stripped to the waist

and shaved. His skin, in the lamplight, had the texture and color of fine-grained leather. He put on a clean shirt as rain beat against the windows and thunder rumbled overhead.

Dressed, he found his way to Cora Hill's door and knocked. She opened almost at once, and he recognized her as the woman who had been on the train. She laughed softly at his evident surprise.

She said, "Come in. I was wondering if you were going to ignore my note."

He stepped inside and saw that this was a suite of rooms. A lamp with a big flowered bowl glowed softly on a round table. Beside it was a silver tray with two decanters and glasses.

Shannon turned and said, "You had most of the day to speak to me, but now I'm glad that you waited."

"I didn't know who you were, though I must admit that I wondered. And then a lady doesn't approach a strange gentleman on a train, does she. Would you like a sherry? Or do you prefer brandy?"

"Brandy, thanks."

She moved to the table, looking very beautiful in a silk robe with a Chinese design. The robe had a white background and was a dramatic contrast to her jet black hair. She handed him his drink and smiled fully at him, showing strong white teeth.

"Dave spoke so often about you that I feel I know you. Shall we drink to him?"

"That seems fitting," Shannon murmured, and they touched glasses and drank. Flames flickered in a small fireplace.

"Now sit down, won't you? Over here, please. On the sofa." She smiled faintly. "And now tell me why you keep watching me in that strange way."

"I was just wondering how close you came to being my sister-in-law."

She sat next to him and smoothed the silken shimmer of the robe across her thighs, a bemused expression on her dusky face. "I liked Dave very much," she answered finally. "It's possible that we might have married—" She broke off and looked at him. "But there's no point in speaking of that now, is there?"

"You're right."

She gazed at the fireplace, then said abruptly, "Have you been to see McGovern?"

"Yes."

"Did he offer to buy your ranch?"

"Yes."

"Do you mind telling me—" she began.

"I refused his offer," Shannon said.

She smiled. "Did he mention that I might make you an offer?"

"No."

Her smile widened. "I like you, Jim. Your answers are honest and yet they don't give you away. Most men talk too much. They use up a hundred words to say 'yes' or 'no.' Lord knows I've met enough men to be able to judge." She laughed. "You mustn't take that wrong, Jim. But I used to run a saloon in this town. So you can understand that I've met all types of men."

"I reckon you must have. What happened? Did you sell the place?"

She nodded. "There's money in the saloon business, but it depends a great deal on where you're located. This is strictly cattle country. All summer long this town is dead, and things aren't much better during the winter months. It's only during the spring branding and fall roundup that the money rolls in, so I decided to make a change and bought the Bar-H ranch not long after Dave settled here. A person can do worse than invest in cattle because there will always be a market for beef."

"I understand the market can get pretty low at times."

"Jim, you're right. The cattle business can be unpleasant, but if beef prices hold up at all during the next five years, I expect to make enough money to retire."

Shannon said dryly, "The way I understand it, you want to buy me out. But if you keep telling me about beef prices holding up, and retiring after five years, I might decide to give the cattle business

a whirl myself."

She laughed. "Jim, I'm only a woman, and sometimes a foolish one at that. But running a cattle ranch is still a gamble. It depends a lot, of course, on what you have to work with. Now my ranch is small and over-stocked because I didn't market any beef this fall. I want to build my herd. Jim, I'll be frank with you. I'm just back from Cheyenne where I paid way too much for a dozen blood bulls because I know that in three or four years they'll more than pay for themselves.

"That's only part of it. Even more important is that I need grass. And I need the wild hay Dave cut and stored for winter feed. In other words, I want to buy the place, Jim, and I'll give you more than a fair price."

Shannon said, "I'm located across the valley from you, a matter of some fifteen-eighteen miles. That means you'd have two separate ranches to worry about."

"That would be my worry! And I can handle my own business."

SHANNON gave no indication that he had heard. He said slowly, "Unless, of course, all the outfits get together the way Dave wanted and split Coleman's range so that you'll end up with a strip connecting the two ranches."

"That would be fine, but I doubt that'll ever happen. You say you talked to McGovern and that he offered to buy your place. But don't think for a minute that he wants it for himself. In case he didn't mention it, he represents Durrant."

The flames put a flickering glow against the woman's face. She said abruptly, "Durrant is ambitious. He didnt buck Coleman because he wasn't strong enough, but now things are different. He wants what Coleman claimed and more—if he can get it. That's why he'll try to buy you out for next to nothing."

Shannon kept silent, though he had to admit that she was probably right about McGovern representing Durrant. The lawyer had refused to name his client, and his offer had been ridiculously low. Shannon looked at the woman and said, "How much are you offering me"

"Eight thousand cash."

"That's fair enough."

"I'll wager it's at least two thousand more than McGovern offered."

"That's true."

"Then you'll sell to me?"

"Not the way things stand, now," Shannon said. He added, "Besides, it'll be another week before the estate is settled."

"I need your place," she said grimly. "I need it to strengthen my position."

Shannon smiled. "You sound like a general, preparing for war. Things can't be that bad."

"You don't know Durrant!"

She spoke angrily, her hands gripped in her lap, an expression of sullen impatience on her face. Despite her previous outward assurance, Shannon sensed that she felt suddenly insecure. And she was more upset about Durrant than seemed logical. It was as though she was at once repelled and fascinated by the tall man.

Shannon said, "Have you known him long?"

"What difference does that make?"

Shannon remembered the mocking smile Durrant had shown her at the depot, and he wondered what there had been between these two in the past that still had the power to upset her.

She said abruptly, "If you stay here you will end up having to fight him."

"You mean I have no choice?"

"You have the choice of either selling out to him or to me, or leaving the country."

"Miss Hill, you're making too much of this."

She studied his face. A slow smile softened her lips. "I'm not," she said. "But you won't sell out or leave unless you choose to do one or the other. You won't be forced, will you?"

"That's right."

She was smiling fully now. "You will fight if you have to. I know that, Jim."

Something stirred in Shannon. He did not know what it was, the rain beating

against the windows, the fire's glow, the brandy or what—he knew only that he did not trust this woman and yet needed to hold her in his arms.

"Come here," he said, and drew her against him. Her face lifted to his and her mouth yielded, and he could feel her trembling. But when she looked at him it was with that same strange intensity, and she whispered, "Fight him, Jim. Promise me you'll fight him."

"Don't talk so much," he said, and knew it wasn't the brandy nor any of the rest of it—it was only this woman that he could not trust. "Don't waste this on talk."

It was well past seven when he left her and made his way to the dining room and found Iris Elder and her father already waiting. . . .

SAM ELDER was a graying man with mild eyes and a gruff voice, and though all through the meal he himself was friendly as could be, Iris treated Shannon with a distant coolness that puzzled him.

When her father spoke of the trouble at the stock pens, she said stiffly, "Fighting Rintoon didn't prove a thing. And it might even lead to further conflict."

This annoyed Shannon. She was at once right and terribly wrong, but she refused to see the other side of the matter.

She said coldly, "Are you going to sell the ranch?"

"Why, I haven't really thought about it," Shannon said.

"You've been upstairs with Miss Hill. Didn't she make you an offer?"

Shannon looked at her, and suddenly he began to understand the reason for her coolness toward him. Since she disliked and perhaps resented Cora Hill, she naturally took a poor view of anyone who associated with the woman. It certainly couldn't be anything else, Shannon thought.

"Yes, she made me an offer," he admitted.

"I thought so. She's been trying to buy Will Denro out right along, but he won't sell. He just wants to be left alone like the rest of us."

"Where does Durrant stand?" Shannon asked.

Elder said slowly, "Well, he wasn't exactly against Dave's plan to split Coleman's range, but he wanted too big a chunk. So when Dave told him that wouldn't be fair to the rest of us, he walked out of the meeting."

"What are the rest of you going to do about it if he tries to grab all that free range?"

"Why, now, I dunno," Sam Elder said slowly. "Seems like with Dave gone we can't get together."

So that was it. Dave had held the small outfits together; he had been their leader against Durrant who wanted more than his share. As Iris had said, the rest of them just wanted to be left alone, and Durrant must have known this. As he must have known that once Dave was out of the picture, any opposition against him would collapse.

"I'm not saying Dave was wrong," Iris told him. "He had a fine plan that would have worked. But with him gone—"

Shannon said abruptly, "You think Durrant had him killed?"

Her eyes wavered. "Jim, I didn't say that. All I'm saying is that we don't want trouble."

Shannon didn't find that easy to swallow, for it just about proved that they were all afraid of Durrant. They had kept to their side of the fence while Coleman ruled the valley, and now that they had the chance—and the right—to spread out, they wanted to stay where they were before trouble had really started.

If there had ever been any loyalty between them, it had broken down at Dave's death. He must have spoken to them about unity and strength, but now each separate outfit was huddled in the shell of its own frightened little code that backed away from the mere hint of trouble.

Shannon said, "If all of you feel this

way, Durrant'll surely take what he wants."

"Let him," Iris said. "None of us are strong enough, or even want to fight him, unless Miss Hill is an exception."

Sam Elder said mildly, "Now, Iris."

"All right, then. Maybe that's not what I mean. Maybe she won't need to fight him."

"You're not being fair," Elder told her.

"I don't know why not," she answered. "Everyone knows that she used to go around with Durrant when she ran that saloon."

"Is that right?" Shannon murmured.

"Of course. It was a local scandal. They only stopped seeing each other when she bought her ranch. Everyone thought, then, that they would get married and run their cattle under one brand, but they didn't. Now they don't even speak. But once Durrant gets what he wants, you can bet she'll make up with him."

There was something here that offered Shannon food for thought. What Iris had said gave him a better understanding as to why Cora Hill felt about Durrant as she did. For here were two ambitious persons who wanted the same thing—room to spread out so that they could raise more cattle and consequently make more money. United, they might have been strong enough to get what they wanted.

But they hadn't worked together, and the reason was pretty plain. For had they united, one of them would have had to lead and so dominate the other, and both had rebelled at this.

Or did it go beyond that? Could it be possible that they were attracted to each other but that their personal ambitions stood between them? Shannon remembered with an odd irritation that Cora had seemed both repelled and fascinated while she spoke of Durrant.

Love, it had been said, was close to hate. Was Cora Hill torn between these two emotions where Durrant was concerned? It was certainly possible because she was a strong personality who had been used to running her own affairs, and she would fight against buckling under to someone else. Even though she loved the other, Shannon thought.

This was a bitter moment, for he was remembering what she had whispered to him as he held her in his arms; Fight him, Jim. Promise me you'll fight him.

Damned if I don't think she wants to use me, Shannon thought. She wants to prove something to Durrant and to herself, and she's going to prove it by having me fight the man. She hopes!

He wondered what she would do if she had to stand alone. Would she, in the end, give in to Durrant? Shannon grunted at the thought, for he knew he was getting ahead of himself. He looked up as Sam Elder spoke.

"I've got a man—Buck Hudson—watching your place on account of the fellow Dave had working for him quit."

Shannon nodded. "McGovern told me. It was neighborly of you, Sam." He saw that Iris was smiling at him.

"Let's forget what happened. I haven't gossiped so much in a long time and I'm fair ashamed of myself. Jim, would you like to come out to supper tomorrow night?"

"Be a pleasure."

SHANNON spoke of the years he had spent in Mexico while they finished their meal. As they left the dining room, a stocky, red-faced man in a wet slicker entered the lobby. His gaze shuttled from Iris' laughing face to Shannon, and a flare of jealousy showed nakedly in his eyes and was gone. He came up to her and said gruffly, "Since you're staying in town, I figured we'd take in the church meeting tonight."

"Why, that would be nice, Will. You haven't met Dave's brother. Jim Shannon, Will Denro."

They shook hands. Will Denro said in his gruff way, "I hear you tangled with Rintoon."

"We had a misunderstanding."

"Poor way to get started around here."

Shannon shaped an answer to this, but Iris said quickly, "Jim, would you like to join us at church?"

"Not tonight, thanks. I'll look around town and hit the hay."

Iris and Denro went out then, and Shannon said good night to Elder and went after his slicker. He did not relish a walk in the rain, but he had a reason for going out. Since he meant to leave town before the stores opened in the morning, he wanted to take this opportunity to buy a gun. From all he had learned since his arrival, he figured he might need one. . . .

Rain glazed his slicker the moment he stepped from the veranda; it filled the ruts in the street and pocked the muck. Most of the stores were darkened and he hurried across the intersection and walked swiftly along the boardwalk.

He found a hardware store in the last block and had to cross through the muck to reach it. The proprietor was just turning out his lamps as Shannon entered. He made his purchases—a shell belt and a Colt revolver plus a Winchester and ample ammunition for both weapons. The proprietor wrapped them in heavy paper, Shannon paid and started back to the hotel with the awkward bundle under his arm.

He was crossing the intersection cat-a-corner when it happened.

Out of the murky darkness and the stinging rain there came a rider. Shannon saw the man's arm swing an overhead circle, saw the loop of the rope snake toward him and he flung himself to one side, thinking, you fool! You should have expected something like this!

The rope struck him as he fell and then the horse came at him, and as he rolled from beneath its hoofs he caught a glimpse of a tight-set grinning face and saw it was the same man who had smashed Dan Elder against the loading pen.

It was all so silent, so quick. The horseman was past him and gone, and now there was only the splashing thud of hoofs. He realized that he had dropped his bundle, and as he rose to look for it he saw the burly figure running at him and knew it must be Rintoon, and he thought; hurt him, but don't give him a chance to hurt you.

They had been laying for him, waiting for this opportunity, and if the rider had roped him he would have been dragged through the muck and helpless to stop it.

Shannon stayed on one knee and looked around as if unaware of Rintoon's approach; when the man was nearly upon him he threw himself squarely in front of Rintoon's legs.

The burly man grunted as he lost his footing and slid face-down through the mud.

As Shannon lunged to his feet the rider rushed him a second time, and the stinging end of a wet rope caught him in the face. The horse pounded on past, snorting, and Rintoon came around and hurled himself at Shannon with an animal-like growl.

The man's weight knocked Shannon flat on his back. He jack-knifed and kicked out with both feet, and the high, hard heels of his boots caught Rintoon below the knees. The big man backed off and circled warily as Shannon rose and went after him. He took a jarring blow in the chest before he was close enough to catch hold of Rintoon's coat. He drove a knee home then, and hammered a blow to the burly man's face. Rintoon sagged.

An expression of cruel derision twisting his mouth, Shannon went to work on the man. Two brutal blows brought blood spurting from Rintoon's nose. He staggered and came up against a hitch rack, and Shannon took him by his coat and slugged him three more times, in the face, then set himself and drove one final blow into that bloody pulp. Then he let go of Rintoon and watched him sink down and lie still.

He whirled then, as the rider came at him a third time; the gun roared above him and a tongue of flame leaped out; then the rider vanished at a hard run.

Men appeared out of the darkness as

Shannon picked up his bundle. He ignored the flung questions and went on to the hotel, a granite look to his heavy-boned face, and he was thinking that the rider had tried to kill him, and wondered why. Was Durrant behind it? Or had the rider fired out of sheer rage?

Whatever the answer, one thing was certainly obvious—they were out to get him. And just because they had missed him once didn't mean that they wouldn't try again.

HE LEFT town early next morning on a rented horse. The sky was clear and a light breeze carried the scent of pine and sage. Puddles of muddy water on the road reflected the first sunlight.

Shannon rode at a slow gallop, his gaze taking in the rolling reaches of wet and shaggy grass that broke against a line of wooded hills southward. There was snow on the peaks of the tall mountains beyond. To the north, thunderheads held the promise of more rain.

It was immense country that filled a man's eyes and somehow made him feel bigger within himself. The pale sun was climbing steadily into the blue when Shannon swung from the road and followed a set of wheel ruts that led to Elder's place. He forded the chilly river and climbed a slope and saw the ranch buildings in the far distance; he picked up another wagon trail that he knew led toward his own ranch.

A half hour later, entering a natural little basin, Shannon came across a scattered herd of cattle branded with Dave's Lazy Lightning iron; soon afterwards he saw Dave's holdings below a knoll studded with live oaks. A man carrying a rifle came from the house and waited warily as Shannon entered the yard. Shannon saw a lean man with a weathered face in a worn mackinaw. He pulled rein and introduced himself. "You expecting trouble?" he asked.

The man was Buck Hudson, the rider Elder had left in charge of the ranch. "Glad to see you here," he told Shannon, and reached up to shake hands. "As far as expecting trouble is concerned, I've seen Hat riders scouting around here all week, and after what happened last night I ain't taking any chances."

"What's that?"

Buck Hudson indicated the two front windows of the small house, and Shannon saw that they were both broken.

"Happened around midnight. Someone spanged rifle slugs through 'em and was long gone by the time I got outside."

Shannon grunted, wondering if it was the same man who had tried to kill him in town last night. Having missed his try, the fellow could have stopped here on his way to Hat to shoot out the windows out of spite.

"They ever bother you before this?"

"Up till now, they've kept to themselves, but the reek of trouble is damn strong. Light down, Mr. Shannon. I got fresh coffee on the stove."

Buck spoke of the ranch while they drank their coffee. "You got a nice spread here. Close to six hundred head of fat beef and plenty of hay to carry 'em through the winter. Come next fall, you could make some money."

Later, Buck showed him around the place, and Shannon found himself taking a liking to the man. He asked where Coleman's old place was located, and Buck pointed out a series of hills that rimmed the western end of the valley. "Coleman put his buildings up on a saddle about seven miles yonder. Better watch your step if you mean to ride that way, though. Might be you'll run into Hat punchers."

"How many men has Durrant got working for him?"

"He had six regulars, but he hired four or five more for roundup. Most of 'em have been working the high country back of his place."

"He's got cattle to spare, is that it?"

"I reckon he can gather a sizeable herd even after shipping his market beef. I'm thinking he's getting ready to push 'em

s grass."

everyone held the same view urrant meant to do. And why e man take what grass he d why didn't the rest of 'em do the same instead of grumbling and staying put? It didn't make sense.

Buck Hudson left shortly, saying he had better check with Sam Elder. Shannon had another look at the horses in the corral.

A tall gray took his fancy. He found gear in a shed and saddled the animal, turned the livery stable nag into the corral. He felt an army man's instinctive need to scout his terrain. Mounted on the gray, he thought bitterly that these holdings represented the sum total of Dave's life. Looking around, he wondered if he himself would stay on here. Indecision worked all through him; maybe he had been rootless so long that he could never settle down.

Faintly annoyed with his thoughts, he rode back across the river and veered toward Coleman's old homestead. That was as good a place as any to start scouting the valley.

He picked up a trail finally that lay like a flung rope across these western hills. The trail traversed a grassy slope, twisted through a stand of aspens and joined a wagon road that came out on a saddle that overlooked the valley. Here, Shannon saw the huge rock-and-timber house and numerous outbuildings that made up Coleman's old holdings.

For an ambitious man this was a fine location. The 160 original acres themselves amounted to little, but the one who owned them would be in a better position to spread out than any of the other ranchers. Below, as far as the eye could reach, were thousands of acres of free grass. Why hadn't someone—Cora Hill, for instance—bought this homestead after Coleman moved out?

THERE was no sign of life around the buildings, no horses in the big corrals or on the meadows beyond. Shannon swung down and glanced in the cook shack and strode on to the log bunkhouse and looked inside. A dozen tiered bunks along each wall told him the number of men Coleman had had on his payroll; and he was noticing that there were blankets on three of the bunks, when a harsh voice told him to raise his hands and turn slowly.

Shannon obeyed, rage leaping all through him. The man stood a dozen feet away, a Colt steady in his hand, and Shannon saw it was the same fellow who had tried to kill him last night.

A second Hat puncher appeared from behind the cook shack. He looked Shannon over and guffawed. "Now that we got him, what're we gonna do with him, Crow?"

"He's trespassing," Crow said, and his enraged eyes burned the skin of Shannon's face. "Man's got a right to shoot a trespasser, ain't that so, Toby?"

"What do you mean, trespassing?" Shannon said. "According to what the marshal told me, these buildings are located on Coleman's original homestead."

Crow grinned wickedly. "Sure. But what he didn't tell you, on account of he doesn't know, is that Durrant bought this homestead from Coleman."

So Durrant was playing it smart, Shannon thought. He had made his first move and hadn't mentioned it to anyone. Now he had what Cora Hill wanted—two ranches from which to operate.

"You ain't such a hell of a soldier, Shannon," Crow bragged. "We been watching you since you crossed the river."

"And from now on I'll be watching for you and remembering that you tried to kill me last night," Shannon said.

"What makes you think you'll live to watch me?"

"I'll live all right," Shannon drawled. "You're the one that's gonna worry from now on."

Crow stepped forward, a sudden grunt of rage breaking out at Shannon's confident talk. He swung suddenly and struck Shannon alongside the jaw with the bar-

rel of his gun, then moved back at once. Shannon sagged against the jamb as his world reeled, but he shook his head briskly and straightened up. Leaning forward, he faced Crow, eyes blazing with contempt.

Crow gestured with the gun. "Come on, make a try," he said softly. "You're wearing a gun. Just lower your arms and make a try for it."

Then he laughed suddenly and said, "Tie his horse, Toby. We don't want him running off."

Toby walked over to the gray and led the animal toward the corral, and once again Crow gestured with his gun. "Drop your gunbelt and step clear.

Shannon lowered his arms carefully and unbuttoned his coat, thinking that if Crow didn't kill him, the man at least meant to gunwhip him to within an inch of his life. He tried to figure out the reason for Crow's intense rage, but there was no time to think about anything except how to get out of this tight.

Blankets on three bunks. Where was the third man? Was he with their horses? Shannon had the coat open now, his fingers on the big brass buckle of the shell belt—and the open doorway was directly behind him. As he started to unbuckle the belt, Toby returned from the corral, saying, "Dave Shannon used to ride that gray," and at the words Crow snapped a look at the other.

It was more than Shannon had bargained for. He threw himself inside and slammed the door. Crow let go a scream of fury and emptied his Colt in the door and Shannon, to one side, answered with two bullets and then ran to the end of the building where he snatched up a stool, smashed a window and stepped over the sill.

When he looked past the corner he saw no one; and he was turning to climb the slope that rose directly behind the bunkhouse, when he saw the man with a rifle less than ten feet away.

Before Shannon could bring his own weapon to bear, the rifle roared and he felt his arm jerk as the bullet struck, and the gun fell from his hand.

"I got him!" the man yelled excitedly. "Crow! I got him!"

As though maddened by this, Crow commenced to rave before he ran into sight. "Did you kill him, you damn fool! If you—"

He ran past the corner of the bunkhouse and stopped short, and a gleeful grin broke out on his face. "Thought you got away with something, didn't you?" he said softly, and came at Shannon in a half crouch. Then he stopped and straightened and laughed with relish. "Tie him to the corral fence! I'm gonna do worse to him than what he did to Rintoon!"

He seemed caught up in a fury that was black and bitter and held an edge of gloat, and again Shannon wondered at it. There was nothing he could say here to stop what was coming, nothing he could do until another chance presented itself, and Shannon made no effort as they marched him to the corral.

Crow told Toby to get a rope, and the moment the man had gone Shannon flung himself at the third man, but Crow slugged him from behind, and his knees buckled and he went headfirst into the muck. He braced himself with his right hand and looked from the third man to Crow, who was less than six feet away. Crow was the man to beat. A strange streak of cruelty ran through him and mastered him. Shannon fisted a handful of mud as Toby crossed the yard with a coil of rope swinging from his arm. Crow glanced at him as he came up, and Shannon flung the handful of mud at the man's face and dove at his legs.

They went down in a tangle, Crow screaming his rage. Shannon grabbed for his gun as Toby jumped to club him. Suddenly the third fellow yelled, "Hold it! Someone's coming! Hell, it's Cora Hill!"

CROW cursed and scrambled from under Shannon, who took that opportunity to snatch the gun from the

other's hand. He plunged after Crow and pulled him down and was clubbing him savagely about the head when Cora Hill stopped her black gelding and called, "Jim, stop it! You want to kill the man?"

"I'd just as soon," Shannon said hoarsely, and climbed to his feet and turned to Toby and the third man. "If this was Durrant's idea tell him next time any of his men cross me I'll be after him personally."

He collected his hat and gun and rode out of the yard, Cora at his stirrup. She murmured, "You play rough, don't you?"

"That sidewinder back there tried to kill me last night, and he tried again just now. You expect me to go easy with him?" He looked at her. "How do you happen to be Johnny-on-the-spot?"

"I thought you might be at your place and I was riding to see you when I heard gunfire, so I decided to see what was going on. What started it, Jim?"

He told her and saw her face tighten with anger.

"So Durrant bought Coleman's homestead. I tried to buy the place, but McGovern said Coleman wasn't interested in selling. And all the time that damn lawyer was busy putting the deal through for Durrant."

She rode on in bitter silence until they reached the creek, where Shannon stopped to wash his face and scrape mud from his clothes. She said, then, "Do you see where that puts him?"

Shannon turned on her, water dripping from his face. "Who do you think you are, always worrying about yourself?"

Cora looked startled at Shannon's violent outburst of temper, and she redded slowly. "I'm thinking of the others, too."

"The hell you are!"

Her lips tightened. "You don't trust me. I sensed last night that you didn't trust me."

"As long as you can't make your mind up about how you feel where Durrant's concerned, you're not to be trusted."

"I made it pretty plain last night how I feel about him!" she said, and her eyes hardened in the pale oval of her face.

"You did a lot of talking, yes," Shannon said. "But what you said and what you felt didn't team up. Do you think I'm blind? You used to run around with Durrant and you're still attracted to him." He checked his arm and found the bullet had merely creased it.

"Shut up! I will not stand for any man telling me—"

"Now you're speaking the truth," Shannon interrupted brutally. "You want to be boss. The only reason you're afraid of Durrant is that he might end up taking what you want, and you couldn't stand to see his outfit top yours."

"I'm not afraid of him!"

"The hell you're not! You used to run around with him, but since you bought the ranch you two don't even speak. I'll bet my saddle that he wanted to team up with you and fight Coleman, and that you refused because you couldn't stand the idea of him bossing you." He tied a bandana around the wound and looked at her.

She flushed scarlet. "That's not true!"

"Never mind," Shannon said. "Just don't give me any more of that 'Fight him, Jim,' because I'm not taken in by it. You can damn well either do your own fighting or join up with him, I don't care which."

He might as well have struck her. Slowly, she walked her horse over to him, leaned down and slapped him hard across the face. Then she wheeled her mount, splashed through the creek and galloped in the direction of her ranch. . . .

Shannon picked up the livery stable horse at his own place and led the animal back to town. It was dusk by the time he rode into Elder's yard and learned that he wasn't the only one who had been invited to supper. Will Denro and Johnson were at the corral talking to Elder.

Iris came from the house as Shannon rode up, and when he stopped she walked over and looked up at him anxiously. "Jim, your face is bruised and swollen. They hurt you last night, didn't they?"

So she didn't know what had happened

earlier that day at Coleman's. He said, "Bruises heal, Iris."

"Will and I heard about it when we got back from the prayer meeting. I meant to see you, but there was no light in your room." She blushed faintly. "One of them shot at you."

Shannon grinned. "I'm still here."

"I'm glad. Yesterday at the stock pens —well, there's no use talking about it. But what they did last night was pretty awful. They might have killed you." She hesitated. "Jim, you're not the kind that will listen to a woman, but I wish you'd listen to me. Keep out of their way. Don't give them a chance to hurt you, and I'm sure they'll forget what's happened so far."

"We'll see."

She smiled and returned to the house, and Shannon rode on to the corral and swung down. Will Denro gave him an affronted look, resenting his presence. He strode toward the house as Shannon loose-cinched his saddle and looped the reins around a corral rail. Elder frowned at Will Denro's receding back and rubbed his jaw and turned to introduce Johnson, a stocky, middle-aged bachelor.

Johnson said, "I hear you been stepping high since you got here."

"Not high, careful," Shannon said.

"Well, I can't say I liked that business about the shooting last night," Johnson said. "Been a long time since a shot was fired in anger around here."

"You sure about that?"

"Why, I dunno as I—"

"What about the shot that killed Dave?" Jim interrupted.

Johnson did not answer, and Elder said gruffly, "Let's wash up and put on the feed bag."

DURING supper, Shannon sensed that Johnson and Will Denro had been invited for a purpose; this get-together was a meeting of sorts. Denro was pretty outspoken as to where he stood and why, and as he talked he kept glancing at Shannon in the stubborn way of a man who has no intention of changing his mind.

He said it had taken him six years to get where he was, and he did not mean to jeopardize his holdings by stepping on Durrant's toes.

Johnson was of the same mind. "We all know what he's after, and that he'll get it the way Coleman got it. No use to buck him."

Shannon said, "You all had the chance to spread out and didn't take it. So Durrant beat you to it. He already bought Coleman's original homestead while the rest of you were sitting on your hands."

Then he felt embarrassed at saying it because of the worried way they looked at him, and he said, "Well, you've been expecting something like this, so I guess it didn't come as a surprise."

Iris said sharply, "Where did you hear about it?"

"Why, one of Durrant's men told me," Shannon said, and leaned back in his chair and looked at her; and he was like that when a shot roared outside and the bullet that shattered the window screamed within an inch of his head and ripped through the back wall.

It was all so sudden. For a split second all in the room remained rigid. Shannon was the first to move. He leaped from the table and ran out the back door. Gun in hand, he circled the house and heard rather than saw a figure running along the edge of the yard. Running for his horse, Shannon thought, as he fired and then ran forward himself.

He heard the thump of hoofs then, as the man mounted and set out at a hard run. Ducking low, he glimpsed the hunched-over rider against the lighter sky, and he thought, unless I miss my guess, it's Rintoon. Crow isn't that big a man, and who else could it be but one of those two?

He holstered his gun and turned to his horse, and he was pulling the cinch tight when Will Denro ran out of the darkness and whirled him around.

"Now maybe you know what it means

to buck Durrant! Any one of us in that room might've been killed!"

"Argue about it later."

Will Denro swore. "Who the hell do you think you are! You been here twenty-four hours and got half the valley upset."

"That's not what's bothering you," Shannon snapped. "Now get the hell away from me."

Iris crossed the yard, and Elder followed with a lantern. Iris cried, "Don't go after him, Jim!" and tried to crowd between him and his horse. "Please don't go after him!"

"Why, dammit, he tried to kill me! Of course I'm going after him. You can't let a man—"

Johnson said heavily, "Let him go, Iris." And then, grudgingly, "Jim, if I was ten years younger I'd go with you."

"Please, Jim," Iris cried. But Shannon was already in the saddle. As he galloped out of the yard, he was thinking that Rintoon would likely make for Hat, and that there was a fair chance of cutting the man off before he arrived there.

Though Shannon only knew the approximate location of Hat's ranch buildings, he felt when he saw the lights before him that he had made good time.

He left his horse in a clump of trees and scouted the yard, and saw that the initial light he had noticed came from a lantern that hung outside the bunkhouse.

A work wagon was parked near the door, and three punchers were loading it with plunder. A second wagon, already loaded, was parked near the lighted house.

So Durrant was getting ready to move to Coleman's place, Shannon thought. He saw no sign of Rintoon. The three punchers carting gear out of the bunkhouse were the only men in sight. Was the rest of the crew already at Coleman's?

Shannon crossed to the house and looked through the window. The man writing in a ledger, a lamp at his elbow, was Durrant. He was alone in the barren room, so Shannon opened the door and stepped inside. "Now what the hell," Durrant said, annoyed, but he did not look up or stop working.

Shannon said, "Don't talk to me that way."

Durrant looked around and studied him carefully, and it struck Shannon that no hint of surprise showed on that long-jawed face; it was as if the rancher had expected him. "Don't tell me how to speak in my own house, friend," Durrant said.

"Did your man Toby give you my message?"

"He did. Now if you got something to spill, spill it. But don't waste my time."

"Where's Rintoon?"

"What do you want with him?"

Shannon droned, "Someone shot the windows out of my house last night. Today three of your hard-cases jumped me—"

"You were trespassing on private property."

"And this evening Rintoon took a shot at me while I was having supper at Elder's."

Durrant's face was like baked clay in the lamplight. "You sure it was Rintoon?"

"I wouldn't be here otherwise."

Durrant stared at him in silence. Then, "Well, don't hold me responsible. I fired him when I heard he tried to tackle you last night after I'd told him to keep his hands to himself."

"Your man Crow was in on that deal. Did you fire him too?"

"Rintoon staged it, so he's the one I fired."

"Maybe," Shannon murmured, and he was thinking that either Rintoon had acted on his own because of the beating he had taken, or Durrant had put him up to it knowing that Shannon's death would be a warning to the other ranchers. "And maybe you're a damned yellow-bellied liar."

Durrant's hands tightened on the arms of his chair. "You're packing a gun, else you wouldn't be calling me that."

"I'm holding you responsible for all that's happened. Your men have been getting out of line. Keep them under control or answer to me."

Durrant's eyes flickered. "Your brother wasn't as outspoken as you are, friend."

"My brother was a reasonable man, and it cost him his life. Tangle with me and you'll learn that I can be damn unreasonable."

Shannon took hold of the back of a chair and hurled it with a single motion through the front window. The crash brought Durrant out of his chair. He poised, as though to leap at Shannon, an expression of outrage blazing in his eyes.

Shannon said, "That's to show you I mean business," and backed out of the door and made a run for his horse.

COLEMAN'S old ranch buildings were in darkness, the corrals empty. Shannon was puzzling over this when he remembered what Buck Hudson had told him about Hat riders working cattle back of the ranch.

That could be the answer, he decided. Durrant, ready to move, would do it up right. While the three men hauled the ranch plunder here in the morning, the rest of the crew would be driving the cattle into the valley. One day of hard work was all it would take Durrant to step into Coleman's shoes.

There was little doubt in Shannon's mind that he would find Rintoon where they were holding the herd.

Plus trouble—maybe. Durrant knew now that he was looking for Rintoon. Durrant would also be smart enough to guess that Shannon had heard about the herd in the high country, and that he might go there. Smart enough to send a warning to his foreman to be on the lookout for Shannon.

Shannon turned back toward Hat and the mountains beyond.

The night was cold. By the time he passed Hat's ranch buildings it started to rain, and he stopped to don his slicker.

He did not hurry his horse, for the animal was tiring. Now and then he stopped to scan his surroundings, sensing rather than seeing the tall mountains around him in the rainy darkness.

He estimated that he had been on the trail well over an hour when the gray pricked its ears and uttered a sharp whinny.

Shannon rode forward another hundred yards when he saw a light at the foot of a long slope. As he approached, he saw it was a lantern, and that it was swinging from the bow of a chuck wagon, and he knew the herd would be bedded down on the flats beyond.

He remembered again that Durrant might have sent a warning to Rintoon, and that a trap could have been laid for him, so he drew his gun and held it ready under his slicker.

He rode wide of the wagon to where the herd would be located, and before long heard the grunt of a steer and saw the dark, shapeless mass of sleeping cattle stretch away to blend with the farther darkness.

He pulled the brim of his hat low and started to circle the herd at a slow walk.

Soon enough he saw the bulk of a horseman approaching, and he stopped and waited. When the rider came within earshot, Shannon said, "When do they figure to push this beef into the valley?"

The rider pulled rein and sat hunched inside his poncho looking at Shannon.

"As soon as she gets light, I reckon. What're you doing at this end?"

Shannon said, "You see Rintoon around?"

"He was at the wagon about a half hour ago. Then the boss came up from below and talked to him and he rode out again."

"Where'd he go? Back to the ranch?"

"Durrant did, after he talked to Crow. Rintoon headed north, far as I know." The rider closed the gap and leaned forward and peered at Shannon. "Say, who the hell are you?"

"Brule."

"Brule?" the man said, and Shannon

noticed that his right hand vanished beneath his poncho. "There's no Brule on the payroll."

"I signed on this afternoon. Durrant hired me and told me to report to Rintoon. That's why I was asking."

The other grunted. "Then how come you just got here?"

"I was helping 'em load down at the house."

"Who told you to ride herd at this end?" the other demanded.

"Fellow named Crow."

The other grunted a second time. "I figured the boss was fixing to hire extra hands. Maybe that's where Rintoon went."

"Where's that?"

"Up to Pine," the other said, and chuckled. "Some tough boys hang out up there." He neck-reined his horse. "See you," he said, and rode back the way he had come.

Shannon turned the opposite way. He knew the man would remember their meeting and mention it when he saw Crow, but right now that didn't matter. He hadn't been quite certain, but now he knew that Durrant had lied about firing Rintoon, and he wondered why. Riding away from the herd, he went over it in his mind and at last decided he had the answer.

A rider's behavior always reflected on the outfit he worked for. As far as Durrant was concerned, all who had been in Elder's house that evening knew that it was Rintoon who had fired at Shannon. So Durrant had been protecting himself. He was set to make the one move that could mean his fortune, and he could not afford to jeopardize his position. And he would be doing just that, and taking the chance of having the whole valley turn against him, if word got around that his foreman had tried to drygulch Shannon.

Now, no matter what happened, he was in the clear, for his story would be that he had fired Rintoon before the shooting, and was in no way responsible. His story would be that Rintoon had tried to kill Shannon to avenge the beatings he had taken, and it was doubtful that anyone would disagree with him on that score.

It just about proved what Shannon had been thinking right along, that Rintoon had reached Hat ahead of him and had told Durrant what had happened. Durrant must have sent him back to the herd with the idea of awaiting developments. Then when Shannon had showed saying it was Rintoon who had shot at him, the rancher had ridden personally to warn his foreman. He had more than likely told the man to clear out until he learned where they stood.

Shannon stopped his horse and evoked a picture of the map he had seen in Tanner's office. Then he took his bearings and headed in the general direction of Pine.

TWO hours later he picked up a wagon road on the edge of a deep canyon. It had stopped raining and the air was frosty. High clouds floated across a crescent moon, and now and again he saw patches of new snow in the lee of trees and boulders at the side of the road.

Another hour passed and he was in timber country, and a thin layer of snow covered the road. At a turn in the road he dismounted and struck a match and found the tracks of a horse.

During the coldest and the darkest hour before dawn Shannon rode into Pine, three buildings and a few shacks at the base of a towering cliff. No lights showed anywhere. Shannon found where Rintoon had tied up in front of the saloon and ridden on again. There was no mistake about it, for his were the only tracks since the snowfall. He had stopped for a drink, or perhaps a bottle, and gone on, else he would have stabled his horse to begin with.

Either he was building out of the country, or he had made his way to the logging camp that Tanner had said was closed down for the winter. Shannon rode on.

By the time the first gray light spread

out from the east he was walking along a logging road that traversed a pine plain, and the world was still and ghostly. Daylight had taken over the sky when the road climbed a hillside covered with stumps. He dropped down the opposite slope into a meadow where a stream flowed. Here, he saw the buildings that made up the logging camp, and he saw the horse under the open shed of the corral.

It was enough. Shannon turned back picketed the gray at the edge of the meadow out of sight of the buildings. Now that he had caught up with Rintoon, he was in no particular hurry. He off-saddled the gray and watched him crop grass, feeling hungry himself, his eyes gritty from lack of sleep. He flattened out on the bank of the stream and ducked his head under. The water was achingly cold, but after he had dried himself he felt more alert.

After that Shannon studied the deserted logging camp. It was located perhaps four hundred yards distant, with the sprawling meadow between. There were two long open sheds with peaked roofs, a log bunkhouse, windowless on this side, three fair-sized shacks and the corral. There was no sign of machinery under the sheds, and Shannon knew the donkey engine and boiler and saws would be stored in one of the shacks. The thought struck him that a man could hole up here all winter long and likely never see another soul.

In back of the buildings rose a brush-choked, boulder-strewn slope that ended on a belt of stunted pines. There were patches of snow on the meadow, the roofs of the buildings were powdered with it, but there was no sign of snow on the slope. A week or two from now it would be different, Shannon thought.

He would have to circle and reach that slope, he decided. Crossing the open meadow was too risky at this stage of the game. Rintoon was likely in that bunkhouse, and the place to be when he stepped outside was behind that nearest shed. Shannon had no thought of killing the man; he meant only to make him confess and take him to the law.

Shannon was drawing back from his vantage point when he saw the rider break from the trees at the far edge of the meadow across the stream, and he sank down before he could be seen. Parting the reed-like grass before him, he watched the horseman trot beneath one of the open sheds and disappear behind the bunkhouse. He heard a faint call then, followed immediately by two shots; the next instant the rider galloped back the way he had come.

Shannon rose at once and ran forward, a dismal uncertainty clawing at his insides. The rider had been too far away to recognize, and yet there had been something familiar about him.

Shannon ran under one of the open sheds, came around the corner of the bunkhouse and saw Rintoon sprawled in the doorway. He heard rather than saw movement in the boulders part way up the slope. A rifle shot ripped the air apart and the bullet tugged at his coat. Running desperately, he flung himself across Rintoon's body and rolled across the floor as two more bullets ripped through the open doorway.

"You won't be so lucky next time, dammit!" a voice raged, and Shannon knew it was Crow.

He got hold of Rintoon's legs and pulled him inside and slammed the door. Then he turned Rintoon over. The man had evidently just awakened when the rider called, for all he had on were his jeans and underwear. There were two bullet holes in his chest and he had stopped breathing.

Crow shouted, "Fooled you, didn't we! We've been on your trail right along, Shannon! Then while you were stripping gear from your horse we got into position! Man, you dug your grave when you trailed Rintoon up here!"

So they knew where I was at all the time, but they didn't have the guts to jump me in the open, Shannon thought.

"You're trapped, man, trapped!" Crow shouted with sudden fury. Suddenly there was a shot, and he laughed. "Hear that, Shannon? That was Toby shooting your horse!"

So the other one's Toby, Shannon thought. They fixed me all right. That makes twice I walked into their trap.

HE LOOKED around the building, and there were at least twenty bunks and a stove. On each side of the door was a window. He was trapped all right. The instant he showed himself they would open up on him, that was for sure.

On the other hand, they would have a time trying to smoke him out of here. About the only way they could do that would be to rush the door, and the first one that showed himself in this bunkhouse was a dead man.

A sudden burst of gunfire shattered both windows, one after the other. As the sound of that ceased, Toby yelled angrily, "That ain't doing any good, Crow! You think we can burn him outa there?"

Now that would be a job, Shannon thought. There was snow on the roof, and the heavy log walls would be too damp to catch fire easily.

Shannon slanted a look through the broken window to see if he could catch a glimpse of them, but he saw no one. He shouted, "You boys only half earned your pay when you killed Rintoon! Try and earn the rest of it!"

Crow swore, the oaths ripping from his mouth in an enraged, frustrated sort of way. Shannon grinned tightly. He looked around again and saw Rintoon's rifle and waist gun on one of the bunks. At least I got enough artillery, he thought.

For a while he listened to Crow and Toby arguing. Then there was hoof sound that faded gradually. Then Crow shouted, "Hey, Shannon! Toby's gone to tell the boss that you killed Rintoon and that I got you cornered. He'll be back with the crew before you know it, and then we'll really smoke you outa there!"

They must've been after Rintoon to begin with, Shannon thought. Durrant made his mind up to get rid of his foreman because Rintoon must have been damned scared after the beatings he took from me, and then after he failed to kill me at Elder's he was likely scared enough to leave the country. Scared enough to talk if I ever got hold of him. Durrant knew this, so he told Rintoon to hole up here. Then he stayed to talk to Crow, and there's no doubt but what he told Crow to get rid of Rintoon.

They couldn't have known that I would head this way, though. Not unless that fellow riding night herd told Crow about talking to the new man who called himself Brule. That must have been what happened, and Crow caught on. Then when he and Toby spotted my tracks in the snow, they knew I was trailing Rintoon.

This is really bad, Shannon thought. Even if I get out of this they'll swear I killed Rintoon. And Elder and the rest of them will probably believe it because they know I went after him.

Just then Crow spanged two shots through the door as though he could not stand the suspense of waiting. From the way the bullets ripped into the logs at the end of the bunkhouse, Shannon knew Crow was still in the boulders, no more than thirty feet away.

Crow would never miss at that distance, Shannon thought. He was a cunning, heartless killer, tormented now because his plan to shoot Shannon had failed. I wonder why he hates me so much? Is it because I gun whipped him yesterday? Or does he hate me for some reason that I don't know about?

It must be something else. He showed that he hated my guts before I used that gun on him.

"Hey, Shannon!" Crow shouted suddenly. "Take a good look at Rintoon and see what a dead man looks like!"

Shannon remained silent, remained still.

"He ain't ever gonna take another drink

or fork a horse or deal a hand of poker! They'll put him in a pine box and bury him six feet under, and that's exactly what they're gonna do with you." Crow paused. "Damn you, answer me!"

Shannon said nothing. He could hear Crow muttering to himself. Then, with sudden unchecked fury and malice, Crow half screamed, "I'll see to it that they plant you alongside your brother! Then you two can fry in hell together!"

Shannon got Rintoon's guns and checked to see they were both loaded. He pushed the Colt under his belt and leaned the rifle against the wall.

"That brother of yours was a damn fool! He thought he had it all figured out, but he didn't know what he was up against when he bucked Durrant!"

Water dripped from the eaves as the snow melted. The drops sparkled in the thin sunlight.

"You want to know who killed your brother, Shannon?"

Shannon's fingers tightened on the butt of his gun, but he did not answer.

"I killed him!" Crow shouted. "Durrant wanted him out of the way so I killed him! After I drilled him he just looked at me, and then he grinned." Crow's voice held a sudden bewilderment. "I figured when I reached him he'd be done for, but he grinned at me before he died!"

Sweat came cold on Shannon's forehead. Now he understood the insane rage Crow felt for him, a newcomer in the valley. Crow had killed Dave and it must have done something to him to meet Dave's brother face to face. Probably didn't know himself what it was. Maybe a lurking fear that Shannon would learn the truth and even the score. It must have tormented him to the point where he couldn't stand it any longer. Dave grinning at him as he died. Maybe that had something to do with it. Dug under his guard. Now, what with being unable to get a word out of Shannon, and the waiting getting into him, he was relieving himself of his torment by yelling the truth.

"I killed him, Shannon! And I'm gonna kill you!"

TWO hours passed, and then the sun was directly overhead. During this time Crow continued to shout threats intermittently, while Shannon remained silent, hoping to goad Crow into becoming careless. But the gunman had not moved from the boulders and Shannon knew he could not wait much longer to make his try, for Durrant and his crew might arrive at any time.

Shannon took the rifle and moved at a crouch to the opposite side of the door. He reached up and pulled the latch and yelled, "You still out there, Crow?"

Crow put two shots through the door, jarring it half way open. "You're damn right I'm still out here!" he yelled.

Shannon saw the cluster of boulders then, almost hidden in the brown weeds, and he waited a while, sweating in the silence. He knew Crow was situated so that not even a raking fire would keep him from watching the bunkhouse.

I still got to get out of here, though, Shannon thought. Taking careful aim, he emptied the rifle at the boulders and tried to place his shots between them. He dropped the rifle then, and plunged outside, firing Rintoon's Colt as he headed for the nearest shack. Crow opened up on him before he had even taken three strides.

His first bullet struck Shannon in the thigh and knocked him flat so abruptly that his next two shots missed.

Shannon rolled. As he rose he emptied the Colt at the boulders, dropped it and drew his own gun and limped ahead, hearing the chunk of Crow's lead in the ground around him. A slug seared his back and he went down again, the acrid smell of gunpowder biting at his nostrils. Desperately, he lunged forward, lost his balance and slid on his chest through the slush and then scrambled on like a wounded animal.

He made it. Slugs tore splinters from

the corner of the shack as he made it and kept going, not wanting to give Crow time to think, but only to push him, to force him to panic, to move and expose himself. Shannon made it to the next shed; he darted across to the shelter of an outhouse, and there was no more firing. Now the third shack was between him and the boulders, and he took a chance and limped toward the slope.

There, flat in the brush, the gritty earth cold and damp against his palms, he breathed heavily as his heart pounded against his ribs.

His thigh started to hurt. He lowered his left hand and touched the place, feeling warm blood, feeling the hole in the trousers where the slug had entered, the mushy lump where it had drilled his flesh.

That bullet's still in there, he told himself. But at least it didn't hit bone. He lay quietly, listening hard, wondering if Crow was still in the boulders. He must be, Shannon thought. But he doesn't know where I am, else he'd open up on me. I'll just let him worry for a while, and then I'll go after him.

Five minutes passed, and there wasn't a sound from the boulders. Then Shannon heard a boot scrape against rock, followed by a grunt. Shannon raised on his elbows. Crow's head and shoulders showed as he moved down the slope toward the shack where Shannon had disappeared. He stopped when he reached the clearing, his rifle at ready, and his head jerked as he threw darting little glances from one building to another. Then he went on a slow step at a time.

I'll bet he thinks I'm hurt worse than I am, Shannon thought. Maybe he thinks I'm dead behind that shack, and he can't wait to make sure. Now Crow veered toward the third shack. When he was twenty feet away Shannon brought his gun to cock and rose. "Now it's my turn, Crow! Either drop that rifle or die!"

Crow whirled, making a keening sound of anguish and fright. Shannon fired. His bullet broke Crow's right arm and he dropped the rifle. He took three staggering steps to one side and his whole body began to shake; he made a mumbling, moaning sound and fell to his knees and struck his forehead repeatedly against the muddy ground; and he was like that when Shannon came up, lifted his gun from its holster and said sharply, "Get on your feet!"

Crow staggered to his feet, his broken arm dangling. "Not—in the back," he whispered hoarsely.

Shannon started to ask Crow where he had tied his horse. Then all at once he heard the hammer of hoofs. A rider appeared on the road, reined in and then spurred forward again. Shannon stood for a second watching, blinking his eyes, before he saw that it was Cora Hill.

And then she galloped past the bunkhouse on her latherd horse, shouting at Shannon, her face flushed and angry.

"Durrant and his crew are on their way! So unless you want to get killed you'd better head out of here fast!" Her gaze took in Crow, and then she saw that Shannon had been wounded. "Where's your horse? Shannon, you have got to clear out of here! Durrant's out to get you!"

"I know that," Shannon said. "But how did you learn about it?"

It didn't take her long to tell, and she spoke hurriedly and in a vexed sort of way, as though she half regretted having come here. She'd learned early that morning from Buck Hudson that Shannon was missing, and had gone to see Durrant to find out what he knew about it. She'd found him at Coleman's old place, and while she was there Toby had ridden in and had called Durrant to one side.

"After Toby left, Durrant came over to me laughing. He said you'd killed Rintoon and that Crow had you cornered and that he was going after you with his crew." She left after that and tried to round up help. She rode to Will Denro's place because he was nearest, but Will had told her that he wanted no part of

Shannon's troubles.

"By then I knew I couldn't afford to waste any more time, so I came here. Now don't argue—"

"You came here to warn me, Cora? Why?"

"Don't ask me that! Just tell me where your horse—"

"Does Durrant know you came here?"

"I don't think so. But what difference does it make?" she said, and flushed.

"Crow admitted killing Dave. He said Durrant put him up to it, and I mean to take him to the law."

"Then we'll have to take him with us right now!"

"You mean I'll have to take him with me," Shannon corrected. "You're the one that's clearing out." He went over and picked up Rintoon's pistol, that he had dropped while making his run for the shack.

"You fool!" she said. "Here you are hurt and talking about taking Crow to the law when you can hardly get around."

"I'm all right," Shannon said vaguely. "They shot my horse, but Rintoon's is in the corral, and if I can round up Crow's—"

Cora said crisply, "Be quiet!" And then, with an odd sort of despair, "It's too late! Here they come now."

Shannon saw the riders then, and knew they had been seen in turn. "That does it. Ride out of here, Cora! Go to Tanner and tell him what happened, and have him send for the sheriff."

She hesitated. Then, "All right, maybe that's best. Jim, take care of yourself. I'll be back with help as quick as I can."

She rode away from the buildings at a gallop, but three of Durrant's men veered to stop her. Before she could cross the meadow, they cut her off. She swerved her horse and dragged her rifle from the boot, but one of the Hat men knocked it out of her hand. Then Durrant rode up and there was an argument. The rest of the riders—seven in all—turned toward the buildings. Before Shannon pushed the unresisting Crow into the bunkhouse, Shannon saw Durrant and the three men with him force Cora's horse to the center of the meadow, where they all dismounted. Two of the men stayed to watch Cora and the horses, and Durrant and the other man came forward on foot.

THE others also dismounted before they all came up behind the shacks. A moment later Durrant called out, "Can you hear me, Shannon?"

"I can hear you."

"What happened to Crow?"

Shannon glanced at Crow, who was sitting on a bunk holding his broken arm. Crow did not move at the sound of Durrant's voice, and Shannon called, "He's alive, but hardly in the mood to talk to you!"

There was a short silence. Then Durrant said, "I don't want any trouble with you, but you killed my foreman."

"You told me last night you fired him!"

"Don't lie, Shannon! Give yourself up and we'll take you in to Tanner."

That'll be the day, Shannon thought.

"You won't be hurt!" Durrant said angrily. "Cora will ride in with us. You know we wouldn't take the chance of hurting you with her along."

Maybe not, Shannon thought. But if you ever learn that Crow talked, you might feel it necessary to kill all three of us.

Suddenly another voice called, "Crow! Dammit, Crow, answer me!" That would be Toby, Shannon thought.

"Shannon, stop being a damn fool and give yourself up! And remember that if you force us to hurt you or kill you we'll be well within our rights!" Durrant called.

"I'll tell you what! Send for Tanner, and the minute he gets here I'll give myself up. Fair enough?"

There was a long silence, after which Durrant said, "Send Crow out here first!"

"No."

"Why not?" Durrant demanded, and there was a little worry in his tone. "He's all right, isn't he?"

Shannon looked toward Crow. The

man hadn't moved. He was as good as dead and he knew it, and it was this that had likely broken him down.

"He's all right," Shannon said.

"Then I want to talk to him," Durrant demanded.

"Forget it!"

Durrant didn't answer and Shannon leaned a shoulder against the wall, feeling suddenly weak from loss of blood. I don't know how long I can last if they start in, he thought. All it can get is worse for both me and Durrant. There's a man that's destroying himself. He must be plenty worried about Crow, else he'd realize that he can't hold a woman against her will. He's gonna have to explain that sure enough.

Durrant called, "You got one more chance! Either give yourself up or take what's coming!"

Silence. Then gunfire ripped into the bunkhouse. Slugs tore out the last of the window glass and splintered the door. Crow made the sound of a cornered rat and slipped to the floor and pushed himself under a bunk.

Boots pounded across the clearing then, but Shannon did not dare look out. He kept watching the door. Something solid struck it and smashed it inward, and then he fired and heard men running away.

There was another long silence, then shouts from the meadow. Durrant suddenly called, "All right, pull back!"

Shannon went to the nearest window. He saw a half a dozen riders on the meadow. One of them turned his way, but it wasn't until the horseman passed under the open shed that he recognized Tanner.

"Shannon!" Tanner called out. "Are you all right?"

Shannon came to the door. "Get 'em all over here, Tanner," he said.

Tanner looked at him. "Boy, you seem to be in a bad way."

"Get 'em all over here, all of 'em."

The marshal nodded. "Will Denro went over and saw Elder after Cora Hill talked to him. Seems they had a change of heart. They rounded up Johnson and a few others and came and got me." He turned his horse. "I'll bring 'em in."

They came finally, and Iris was one of them. She was riding beside Cora. When she saw Shannon she swung down and ran to him. "Jim, maybe we've been wrong. I don't know. But Will thought it over and said—"

"It's all right," Shannon said. He looked at Durrant and saw that the tall man's face was pale and strained. Toby was another man who showed strain. He was sitting his horse at the edge of the yard, as though he could not be sure but what he might have to make a run for it.

Shannon said, "Watch Toby! He killed Rintoon!"

Toby uttered a curse and turned his mount, but Will Denro blocked him and put a gun on him.

TANNER said, "He tried to run, which more or less proves him guilty. How about it, Durrant?"

"I was told Shannon killed him," Durrant said. "We were fixing to take Shannon to town, but—"

"It looked to me like you were trying to shoot him full of holes," Tanner said. He glanced at Shannon. "Where's that fellow Crow?"

"Inside." Shannon looked at Durrant. "He said you put him up to killing Dave."

"Let him try and prove it!" Durrant lashed out angrily.

"Durrant, you're finished around here," Tanner said.

"I haven't broken any laws!"

"Maybe not, but you're finished around here just the same. Now bring Crow out here and let's hear what he has to say."

"It'll be my word against his!" Durrant shouted, as Shannon turned and took hold of Crow's good arm and half pulled him to his feet. When they came outside Crow stood there whimpering, staring at the ground, clutching his broken arm.

Tanner said, "Did Durrant put you up to killing Dave Shannon?"

"Yeah," Crow mumbled, and then his knees broke and he fell face-down in the muck. Buck Hudson came up and turned him over, and Crow rose weakly to his feet.

"It's his word against mine," Durrant repeated angrily. "Anyhow, this ain't a law court. But if he wants to admit that he killed Dave Shannon he can damn well hang."

"No!" Crow screamed. "You said you'd stick up for me if anything happened!" He fell up against Buck Hudson, who reached out to support him. But Crow hadn't passed out. He snagged Buck's gun from its holster and fired a wild shot at Durrant. Shannon plunged at him as he fired a second time, and knocked him down. He took the gun from Crow and let him lay where he had fallen.

Durrant exclaimed, "What he said won't hold water! I'll take my chances in court."

"That's no lie," Tanner said. "And I got an idea that before it's over Toby'll spill his guts along with Crow, and that between them they'll put you behind bars."

Three or four Hat men had been talking amongst themselves, and now one of them said to Durrant, "We want our pay when we get back to the ranch."

"You'll get it and good riddance!" Durrant said.

"Some of us care how we earn our pay," the rider said. "You had no call to try and smoke Shannon out of that bunkhouse. Not after he offered to give himself up if you'd send for Tanner."

Shannon leaned against the wall, feeling weaker by the minute. But he was thinking that he had won this much at least, that several men had turned against Durrant in the end. The tall rancher might just get out of serving time, but as Tanner had said he was through in the valley. By the time it all came out in the open, he would be as unwelcome around here as the cholera.

The Hat hands drifted away. Then Will Denro came over and shook Shannon's hand, saying gruffly, "We'd be obliged if you'd stay and do what Dave had in mind, split Coleman's grass so that we'll all get a square deal."

This was another victory of sorts, one for Dave, Shannon thought. Iris spoke to him and then joined Will Denro, and the way she smiled up at him was like a promise.

Then Cora Hill came to Shannon's side and said, "You're going to ride back, but not until I bandage your leg."

"Cora, Cora," Shannon breathed. "Is that all you have to say after jumping on my side of the fence?"

"No," she said, looking straight at him. "I'm going to be honest about something that's turned out to be very important to me. I thought that for a woman to love a man fully she had to humble herself, and it's not true. Since I've known that I loved you I've felt proud."

Shannon felt a sudden choking in his throat, knowing it hadn't been easy for her to say what was in her heart. He said, "How did it happen so quick, Cora?"

"Maybe because I really took a good look at myself after we quarrelled yesterday. What you said then was true—I was selfish, selfish! Now when I think of all the things I wanted, they suddenly don't matter. All that matters is that I want to spend my life with you."

This was something else no one could ever take away from him, that this woman had spoken these words to him, standing tall and proud and giving him something that had been lacking in his own life. He took a long breath.

"I reckon we'll make out just fine," Shannon said.

Nearby, Tanner cleared his throat. He said, "Something for you," and handed Shannon the small carved figure of a horse. Shannon looked at it and grinned.

"Came out all right, didn't it?"

"Took a little extra patience, is all, a horse being harder to carve than a cow. Don't know what I'd have done with a cow, anyhow." Tanner turned away. "Besides, I never did like milk!"

The Valley Terror

By C. V. TENCH

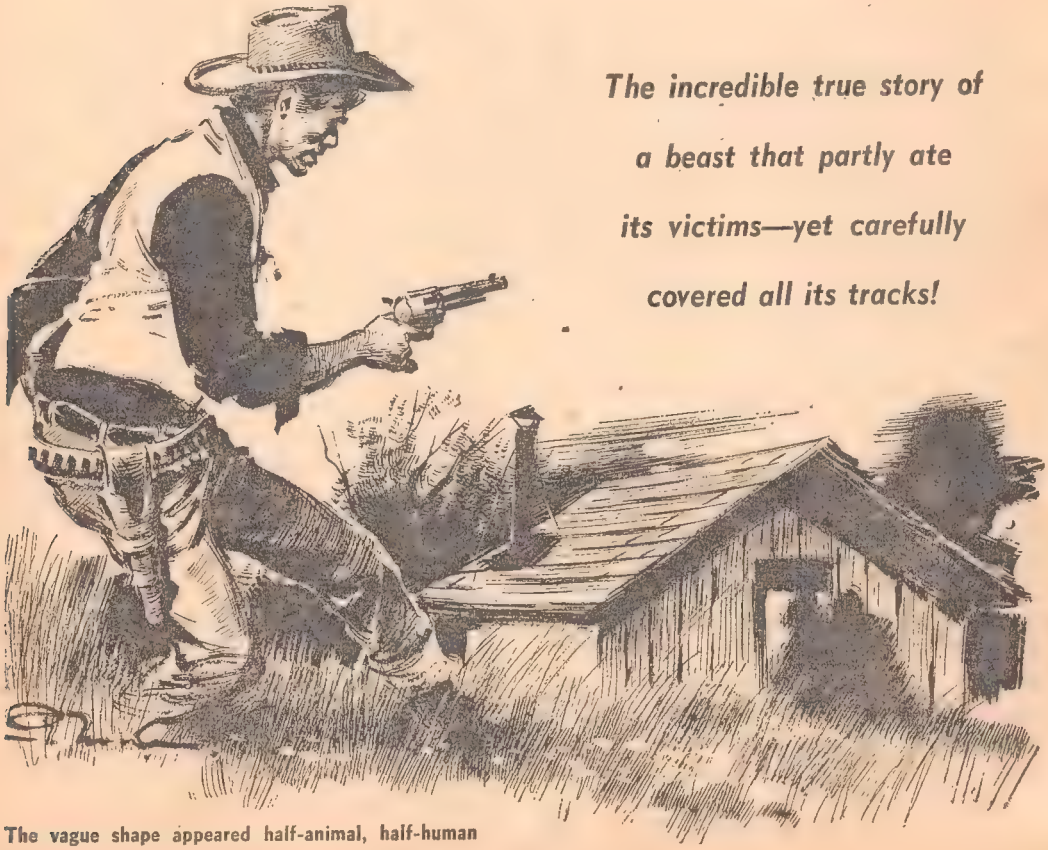
THREE murders within the space of three months, Brockie, and although I've had my men working day and night on the case, to date we haven't unearthed a single clue."

Superintendent Courtney, Officer in Charge of Detachment G, Western British Columbia Division of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, leaned across his desk and eyed Detective-Sergeant William Brockie steadfastly for a few moments. Then he went on:

"My opinion is that the killer is an old resident of the district and knows all the members of my detachment by sight. That's why I sent for you. Being a stranger in these parts and working in plain clothes gives you a big advantage."

"Yes, sir," Brockie agreed. An undercover man, he had arrived from Federal Headquarters at Ottawa less than an hour before. He had gone straight to Superintendent Courtney's office, and formal greetings and the presentation and ac-

The incredible true story of a beast that partly ate its victims—yet carefully covered all its tracks!



The vague shape appeared half-animal, half-human

ceptance of credentials had been done with. Without further preamble Superintendent Courtney had gone into the matter that had been troubling him for some time—the series of murders in the Skeleton Valley District.

"Now, of course, you want full details," Superintendent Courtney continued, picking up a sheaf of papers from his desk. "First you must know that the killer appears to be something more than human."

"More than human, sir?" Brockie questioned incredulously.

"Yes," Superintendent Courtney nodded. "We've kept it to ourselves but the details of these killings are unbelievably gruesome. In each instance, Brockie, the corpse has been found to be not only terribly mutilated but also partially eaten!"

"What!" Brockie sat up straight.

"Shocking, eh?" Superintendent Courtney's eyes and lips hardened. "Yet it is the simple truth. It all began about a year ago when the government threw open to settlers a large tract of land—the Chilcotin country—in the very heart of British Columbia. Prior to that time the district in and around Skeleton Valley had been reserved for cattle ranching. It's splendid territory and, naturally, landseekers poured into the district.

"Trouble followed between the homesteaders and cattlemen. Some of the ranchers violently objected to the invasion of would-be farmers and, as heated protests to the government were ignored, took matters into their own hands. Fences were wrecked, a few shacks were burned down, a number of wells were dynamited. But a handful of arrests and stiff fines quickly put an end to that business. Then followed serious trouble—these murders.

"Three months ago a homesteader named Mehon was found dead in his shack and his body partially devoured. Constable Rampact investigated and reported that the killing was obviously the deed of a wild beast, so we let it go at that. The remains were buried.

"A month later another homesteader was found dead in his cabin, killed in exactly the same way. I doubled up on patrols and warned all residents of the district to be on the alert for a grizzly, mountain lion, or, perhaps, a wolf pack."

"But, sir—" Brockie began.

"I know what you are about to ask," Superintendent Courtney interrupted. "How about tracks? Well, a few days ago a third homesteader was found dead and his body partially eaten. His name was Fulton. I then investigated personally.

"Frankly, Brockie, it was one of the stickiest messes I've ever gazed upon; turned my stomach. Eyeing the ghastly spectacle I was convinced that some wild animal had torn the victim to pieces and expected to find plenty of tracks. Instead—" Superintendent Courtney leaned forward intently—"I found that the floor of the shack and the ground outside had been roughly swabbed! All tracks had been deliberately obliterated! Would or could a wild beast do that?"

"Good Lord, sir!" Brockie stared incredulously. "But if it isn't an animal, why—that is, sir, human beings don't eat one another. It must be a wild animal of some kind."

"Yes," Superintendent Courtney agreed. "But logical reasoning indicates that a human agency is back of it all. There is purpose at the bottom of the crimes—that purpose is to scare the homesteaders, make them abandon their claims and clear out. Could an animal plan that?"

"No, sir," Brockie admitted.

"Well, then, here is the plan of campaign I have mapped out for you," Superintendent Courtney said briskly.

Brockie listened attentively.

The Plan in Action

For a week Detective-Sergeant William Brockie, plain clothes undercover operative completely disappeared. But a cocksure homesteader who gave his name as Jack Pearson had taken over the shack and homestead of the murdered Fulton.

Now, as he stood outside the cabin watching the rays from the westering sun turn the snow-capped peaks of the Rockies to gold, he was troubled with impatience. This was his eighth night and the killer had not made a move. Had the murderer in some way learned of his imposture, or would he elect some other homesteader for his next victim?

Brockie frowned at the thought. There was that chance, but he had boasted so openly that he, Jack Pearson, would like a chance to meet the killer and was certainly not afraid of him. Brockie felt confident that his deliberate bragging was well spread and that he would be selected for the next victim.

But he wished the killer would make a move; this waiting was hard on the nerves.

Still reasoning it all over he turned and entered the cabin. Carefully he went through his nightly procedure. Beneath each of the two small windows he placed chairs and piled them high with pots, pans and dishes. A terrific clamor would announce the arrival of a nocturnal visitor by that route.

Across the door he fitted a heavy wooden bar into the stout sockets he had fashioned. He had learned that the men who had been killed had never been known to lock or bolt their doors, and, although the killer could apparently turn a door knob easily and quietly, it certainly would not be able to break down a door without waking a sleeping man. Then, satisfied with his tasks completed, he stretched out fully clothed on the rough bunk and dropped off to sleep.

With nerve-shattering suddenness he found himself wide awake. The sounds that had aroused him came again; snuffling, growling, animal-like sounds. Something was trying to get into the cabin.

Quietly he sat up and slowly lowered his feet to the floor. His right hand groping beneath the pillow found his heavy service pistol. The heft of the weapon and feel of the cool metal was comforting. Gun in hand, he tiptoed over to the door and bent down.

The stench of a strong breath assailed his nostrils. It was an animal or animals.

Straightening up, he gripped his automatic tighter and placed a hand on the door knob, and at once jerked it away as if the handle had been white-hot—for someone or something was cautiously twisting the knob from the outside.

Gun levelled, he stepped back two paces. His eyes, now adjusted to the gloom, watched the knob turn to its full and the door pushed open. It stopped against the heavy bar. The bar creaked beneath the strain of heavy leverage, then, as quietly as it was opened an inch, the door was closed.

Brockie drew a long, incredulous breath. Something that smelled and sounded like a animal had turned the door knob and tried to get into the shack. Pulling himself together he lifted the bar and opened the door wide. Gun aimed, he stepped back, ready for whatever might enter. He saw nothing.

Cautiously he again approached the doorway and peered out into the night. The killer might be lurking out there in the blackness. Cold reason told him it would be folly to venture outside just then. Reclosing and barring the door he sat down to await dawn.

Daybreak found him a mile from the cabin eyeing a mob of cattle that were approaching in single file along the narrow cattle path on which he stood. Cursing them roundly he stood aside to allow them to continue their way to water.

For over an hour he had painstakingly followed a trail that led from the shack to here. There had been no tracks, either of human or animal; merely the impression of something having been dragged along to obliterate paw or foot prints.

The trail had led to the top of a slight hill upon which he now stood. From his vantage point he stared down into the valley. Smoke was already rising from the chimneys of the dwellings he glimpsed through the early morning mist. The trail might have led to any of them.

As he stared, he had to admit that the killer's method of obliterating his trail was cunning, to drag something behind him until he encountered a cattle path, knowing that the cattle would wipe out all tracks before anyone could follow far, for the trailer would be unable to start trailing before daybreak and by then the cattle would be plodding along the narrow paths that led to water, as they were now.

Until noon Brockie ranged about the countryside, hoping that by chance he might again pick up the trail. He failed. Returning to the cabin he ate lunch, then examined the rough bar he had fashioned for the door.

He saw that the door opened the space of an inch before the bar stopped it. An inch! Sufficient space to allow a piece of iron or tool of some kind to be inserted and lift the bar from the socket. He must tighten the sockets before nightfall in case the killer had noticed its slackness and returned with a tool.

Or—a sudden thought struck him—he would not tighten the bar. He had not fired through the door or done anything to alarm the killer, therefore he seemed an easy victim. Let the killer return with a tool prepared to lift the bar and enter the shack. He would watch and wait from the outside, prepared to trap the prowler inside the shack.

Brockie then settled himself to await nightfall.

The Mystery Solved

From his place of concealment in a clump of willows, Brockie peered steadily at the cabin. He cursed the flies that tortured him, but was determined to stick it out until daylight.

Easing his cramped limbs he glanced at the sky. Ragged clouds were scudding before a full moon. They made the light fitful.

The automatic pistol in his hand gleamed dully. He again examined it. It was ready.

Another hour dragged on and he began to wonder if, after all, the bar had proved to be an obstacle the killer could not overcome. He had lowered the bar into place from the outside, using the barrel of his gun. A barred door suggested an occupant asleep in the cabin. He was meeting cunning with cunning. If the killer was human. He had thought it over many times and was still undecided.

A few drops of rain splattered down. The wind was increasing. Its voice threatened to drown out other sounds. Brockie advanced a few steps nearer to the shack and again crouched down.

Then he stiffened and his grip on his pistol tightened as sounds came to him; faint growls, the rattling of metal.

Straightening up he crept forward. As the wind-tossed clouds swept from the face of the moon he strained to see. Was it his imagination or did the vague outlines in the shadows beside the cabin door change shape? Now half human, now part animal.

He breathed hard as he stared, then silently stood erect. Something had entered the cabin and closed the door behind it. Warily he approached the building.

Brockie had taken ten paces when he stiffened to an involuntary halt. He had glimpsed a dark shape or shapes enter the cabin, and believed he had the thing or things cornered, but now a fresh, faint glow from the high-riding moon showed him that something was moving outside the cabin!

Gun ready, Brockie stared. Again the moon shone clear and he saw the bulk of a man crouched against the door of the cabin, his ear pressed close to the wood.

Brockie strode forward openly, gun levelled. The man leaped to his feet, craning forward rigidly.

"I've got you covered!" Brockie said sharply. "Don't move!"

The man's reply was to open his mouth and shout something that sounded like a call or a command. Again he shouted out, then before Brockie could prevent him

he disappeared into the darkness. As he ran he continued to call out, his cries now being answered by throaty howls from inside the cabin.

For a moment Brockie hesitated, then moved forward to within a few paces of the building. He would give no further warning; the moment the door opened and something came out he would start shooting.

More shouted commands came from out of the distance and were again answered by cries from within the cabin. Abruptly there followed a terrific clamor; the clanging and banging of iron and tin utensils and the crash of splintering chinaware and glass.

The thing or things inside the shack had hurled pots and pans in all directions as they plunged through a window. Brockie raced for the rear of the cabin just in time to glimpse dimly-outlined shapes racing away into the darkness. He emptied his gun after them.

And then the man was shouting to him, calling wildly for help. The shouts rose to screams, mingled with furious snarls and growls. Reloading as he ran, Brockie raced forward.

Further on he saw two animal shapes savagely mauling a man. Again he started to shoot. As the brutes fell back, writhing and twisting in the convulsions of violent death, Brockie holstered his gun, shouldered the wounded man and started back for the cabin.

Laying him upon the bunk he worked fast to get lamps going, for something told him that the man would not last long, and he wanted to know many things.

Lights at last glowing, he turned to the bunk and his eyes widened at what he saw.

The man was huge, well over six feet in height, and was naked excepting for a roughly-fashioned doublet of bear hide, and homemade moccasins. Long tangled black hair straggled to his shoulders, and a matted beard concealed most of his face. As Brockie bent over him he looked up with wild eyes.

"I'm finished," he said weakly. "I don't mind, because you killed my old partners."

Brockie tried to staunch the flowing blood, but realized it was too late. He was relieved to note however, that none of the man's wounds had been caused by bullets.

"What did this?" Brockie asked. "And who are you?"

"My partners." The bearded lips twisted in agony. "You wounded them and made them savage. They turned on me."

"Partners?" Brockie questioned. "You mean—"

"Cougars. Mountain lions. Trained them from cubs to keep people away from my hideout. Don't like people. Like the mountains, outdoors, birds, animals."

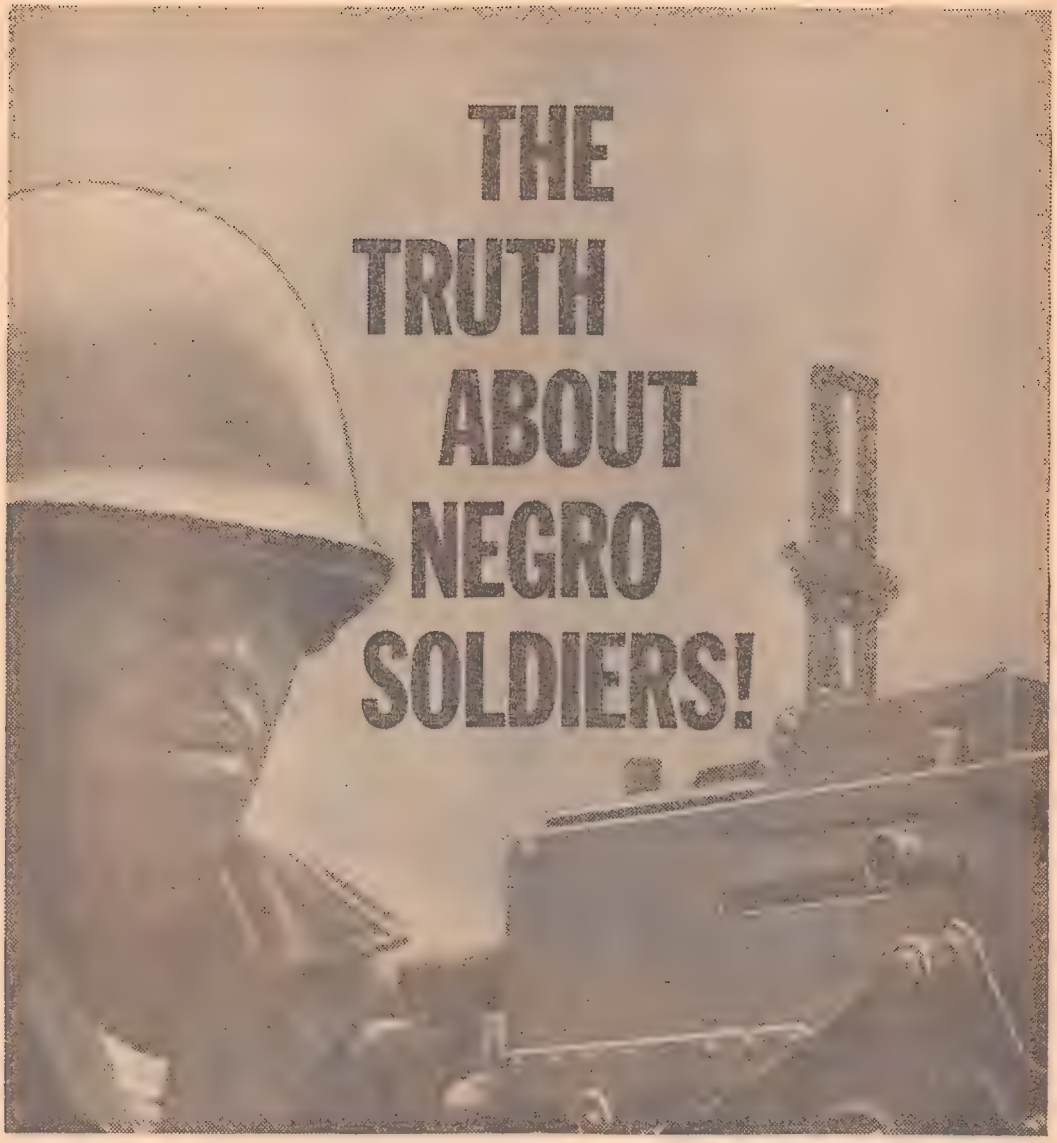
"Who are you?" Brockie repeated.

"Name don't matter," the answer came painfully. "Lived up here for years. Didn't mind a few ranchers and cattle, but those damn homesteaders. Cougars didn't like homesteaders neither, especially when I starved them for a few days and turned them loose in a shack. They did in three damned homesteaders."

Brockie drew a long breath. So that was it. The man was a hermit and had trained ferocious, two-hundred-pound mountain lions to keep away intruders just as an ordinary man might train a dog.

Again Brockie asked: "Tell me your name?"

A tremor was the reply and, looking closer, Brockie saw that the question would never be answered. The killer of Skelton Valley was dead.



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"A pig farmer!" Nora said stormily. "After all, I do have some pride!"

HOG WILD

By JOE ARCHIBALD

The least you could say for a man like Dobie Pinkert, when he saw a thing to do, he done it

DOBIE PINKERT happened to be at the scrabbly homestead out by Lone Loon Creek sampling a fresh batch of Ma Murchison's doughnuts when Jeeter Repp and his two riders rode in.

Jeeter's harsh nasal voice shouted, "Anybody here?"

"Only us mice," Dobie said, and cautioned Ma Murchison with a quick look in his pale brown eyes. Ma put the skillet down and Dobie went out into the yard. He was a slim, loose-limbed puncher with a mild looking front, and he made a practice of having his nutmeg-colored hair cut about three times a year. His nose was about right and he had a wide

mouth that always seemed to be fixing up a grin.

He said to Jeeter, "What are you here for? I don't see your skinning knife."

"A real smart boy, ain't you?" Repp said, just as Ben Murchison came striding up, a pitchfork in his hand.

"I was born sooner than today's sunrise," Dobie said, and eyed the man's doubtful moral support.

They were a pair of ratty-face, shifty-eyed hombres Jeeter called his trouble shooters, and he knew that if the pair could not find trouble to shoot at, they would make it. The stubby tough called himself Ferd Krause, and the big one with the egg-shaped head and the space between his piggy eyes no wider than a bullet, owned up to the name of Tozer.

Ben Murchison cuffed his battered old hat back over his head, planted his feet solid and wide apart and looked warily up at Jeeter Repp. "What is it you want this time? My left leg?"

"You know blasted well what I want, and I aim to get it or out you go!" Jeeter snapped, and got out of the saddle. "You ain't paid me for three months."

"You can wait three more, you crook!" the dry farmer roared, and Ma Murchison appeared in the doorway of the shack. "You swindled me, Repp. You knowed Hank Winterling wouldn't let me tap his crick, and without that water this place ain't worth half I paid you. Nothing but furze and hard dirt. Now get your two-bit gunnies out of my yard!"

"I'm putting you off!" Jeeter yelled. "Pack up your junk and your old woman and git."

Long afterward, Dobie never ceased to admire Ma Murchison's aim. Just as Tozer and Ferd Krause quit their rigs, a heavy wooden water bucket flew across the yard and hit Jeeter flush on the belt buckle. The wind whooshed out of the land shark and he doubled up and rolled in the dirt.

Ferd Krause made his play and Dobie calmly shot his hat off. Tozer had the three sharp tines of Ben Murchison's pitchfork pressing against his stomach even as his fingers closed over his smooth gun handle. Ma Murchison ran into the shack and came out again with an iron skillet.

"Hold a gun on him, Dobie," Ma screeched. "I'll bust his egg-head."

"Hold it," Dobie said, grinning at her.

Jeeter got slowly to his feet, his face as gray as a coyote's hide. He gulped some air into his lungs, glared fiercely at Murchison. "All right, you sodbusters!" he yelled. "I'll come back with a writ. I'll kick you out legal."

"You're a low down, mangy, yellow-bellied snide crook!" Ma Murchison flung back. "Bring the writ but don't have it in your vest pocket, you polecat. We'll be waiting with shotguns."

Jeeter and his men climbed back on their horses. Ferd Krause dropped a grim warning down on Dobie. "You ain't long for this world, cowpoke."

"I'll go along with that," Tozer said.

Dobie grinned. He felt good, his stomach lined with doughnuts. "Go back under your logs," he said to the toughs. Ferd Krause quickly spun his claybank around when he saw Ma Murchison sort of heft the skillet.

When Jeeter and his two backbones had gone, Dobie said, "Everybody knows you was cheated, Ben. Just hang on. Thanks for the doughnuts, Ma. When I marry Nora, you give her the recipe. You promised." He walked over to his black horse and climbed up.

"When will it be, Dobie?" Ma called after him.

"Soon as I sell that piece of land in Fog Bend." He waved to them and rode out of the yard.

Dobie Pinkert was assailed by vague doubts as he rode toward town. How lucky did a man have a right to be? Nora Greenleaf was the prettiest girl for miles and miles around and had been courted by many eligible bachelors—some of whom possessed more than the average share of worldly goods.

Dobie was well aware of the fact that

Amos Greenleaf, the banker, did not exactly do a fancy two-step and break out the cup that cheers when he saw a forty a month cowpuncher in close proximity to his daughter. Then again, he was not brushing up on his shooting and so Dobie figured his chances were even.

He stopped his horse in front of a big white clapboard house just outside of Fog Bend. A piazza with gingerbread trimmings ran all the way around it, and wisteria vines cascaded down in front. Nora was sitting on the porch reading a style book when Dobie shut the gate behind him and tipped his hat.

"Evening, Miss Greenleaf," he said, and felt a warm numbness from head to foot.

She wore a white gingham dress with little tiny dots that was kind of low at the shoulders. Her hair was the color of oak leaves in November and it was piled up neat above her sun-browned face. Her eyes were deep and shiny pools, grayish-green, and her soft red lips were full and tantalizing. Dobie, at the moment, wished he had been born with a flair for poetry.

"Hello, Dobie," Nora said, and the cowpuncher heard meadowlarks singing and a little brook murmuring over glistening pebbles. "Won't you sit for awhile?"

Make it forever, Dobie thought. "Don't mind if I do," he said out loud, and stumbled on the second step.

Five minutes later, he said, "A nice day it has been, huh?"

"Very."

"They say it'll blow up rain tomorrow, Nora. We need it sure enough." He spun his hat with a forefinger, kept shifting his feet. He smelled sweet cologne and his head spun.

"The dance at the Odd Fellows Hall, Dobie," Nora said. "You still want to take me?" Cherry red pushed through the sunburn on her cheeks, and a little laugh escaped her lips.

"Well, now," Dobie said, the birds singing louder under his breastbone. "Not even a cyclone would stop me. What time does your pa get home?" He looked nervously around.

"Oh, he wouldn't harm a fly, Dobie."

"I know, Nora, but I ain't a fly. Well, I'd best be getting on into town. The boss gave me some shopping to do." Nora walked out to the gate with him, her arm linked through his, and Dobie got to wondering if he would dare kiss her goodbye. Then he stopped wondering for Amos Greenleaf, a big brown cigar kicking up clouds of smoke, was coming down the street at a brisk pace.

"Goodnight, Nora," Dobie said, and put a few feet of distance between them in a hurry. Out in front he nodded pleasantly to the banker. Amos Greenleaf grunted a politeness he seemed to begrudge and pushed the gate open. Dobie went on his way feeling like eleven cents worth of coyote liver and wishing he could strike gold somewhere.

DOBIE bought two new bridles, three curry-combs and a bottle of ipecac for Ira Wunch, owner of the Cross J, and then cruised aimlessly around Fog Bend. He was standing in front of the post office next door to the Silver Palace when the stage from the junction rolled in.

The mailbag a gun guard threw down nearly got Dobie, and he grinned and yelled at the man, "Hope your aim with a shotgun is better."

He watched the passengers alight, and his eyes widened when he saw a big flashily dressed man step up to the walk. A diamond flashed from his necktie. He wore a dark frock coat and striped pants and highly polished buttoned shoes. He heard the man ask, "Where can I find Judge Littlefield?"

A real important galoot, Dobie thought, and walked back to the tie-rail where he'd left his horse. Jeeter Repp and his two shadows rode in as he rode out. Jeeter glowered at him, his eyes the color of wet pebbles in the moonlight. Dobie grinned.

"You don't give me no appetite either, Jeeter," he said.

Before he left town, Dobie Pinkert looked over a piece of land on its extreme

western side, land that he owned, left to him by his parents. Will Pinkert had taken himself and Dobie's ma back to Ohio five years ago having given up on Fog Bend as a place to get rich in the lumber business.

Dobie chuckled as he recalled one of his parting shots to his father. "I chase beef and you saw boards," he'd said. "We could have gotten together and sold planked steaks."

This real estate was Dobie's nest egg, and would be worth all of two thousand dollars, folks said, if anything happened to Fog Bend in the way of a boom. But right now it could not buy a whitefaced bull heifer.

Sighing real deep, Dobie rode in the general direction of the Cross J. Crossing Bar 7 range he ran into Hank Winterling and two of his riders. Hank was as blunt as his chin.

"Well, Pinkert?" he asked, "You got over your high falutin ideas yet? Millie would sure like you over to supper tonight."

"You're a persistent cuss," Dobie said.

Hank Winterling had an old maid daughter nearly ten years older than Dobie himself and for two years he had been trying to mate her with the Cross J puncher. Millie Winterling had hardly more pulchritude than one of her pa's quarter horses and about as dainty a waistline. Beside that she had a temper sharper than a hound's tooth. It was common knowledge that a good-sized slab of the Bar 7 would go to the man indiscriminating enough to join her in double harness.

"You're a fool, Dobie," Winterling snapped. "That banker won't ever let you marry his girl. You couldn't keep her in hairpins. Well, if you change your mind—"

"I won't," Dobie said.

Hank Winterling's bushy eyebrows jumped. Dobie could see he was hopping mad real through, and knew the cattleman would not forget this blow to his pride.

Hank roared, "Get off my range and don't cross it again. I won't forget this, Pinkert."

Dobie rode on. A man could sure make enemies in the darndest ways. Three miles from the Cross J, near the mouth of a brush-covered arroyo he stopped to look at a heap of wood ash, and knew it had not been big enough for a camp fire. He grinned. Why, the Phillistines used to rustle cattle on the plains of Moab. Wasn't much harm in nicking a little out of a big herd as long as a man did not get caught, and as long as it wasn't Dobie Pinkert.

Two days later, not long before dusk, Dobie left one of Wunch's line shacks just below a narrow bench in the Trades and headed back for the home ranch. He topped a hogback, dropped down into a stand of timber, and on its far side, found the cattle trail blocked by two men, Ferd Krause and Tozer. Jeeter's toughs held their guns on him, and all he could do was shoot his hands toward the sky.

"I don't get this," Dobie said, his brows knitting. "I have just seventy-one cents and a sack of Durham on me. Surely you don't aim to kill me in cold blood, you two poor excuses for living?"

"You keep your big mouth shut," Ferd said, and relieved Dobie of his sixgun. "Just come with us peaceful or otherwise. I have a hankering to lay this hogleg against the side of your dumb head."

They rode Dobie Pinkert through some pretty rough country for nearly a half hour, and here and there he saw some of Winterling's strays; in the creek bottoms, the pockets, and in the brush. He rose up a slope to a summit meadow, and finally in the shadow of the pines skirting one end of it, he saw Jeeter Repp sitting a mouse colored pony along with two of Winterling's hands. Jeeter's face wore a wide grin. The corners of his mouth were very close to his ear-lobes.

Dobie heard a calf bawl and he smelled woodsmoke. And then he saw the calf roped and tied near a small fire fifty feet away. One of Winterling's men had a

running iron in his hand.

"It's very simple, Dobie," Jeeter said. "If you want to figure it out. Me and Hank Winterling both want something bad, and pooling our interests it looks like we got it. We can swear we caught you with a Bar 7 calf and the running iron. I don't see how you can prove you didn't do it. This is Bar 7 grass. Too bad they don't hang rustlers nowadays, but you could get about three years in the state pen, Dobie."

"All right, I'm over a barrel, Jeeter. How much of my blood do you want?"

Jeeter took a folded paper from his inside pocket. "I have a bill of sale here, Dobie, a sort of deed for you to sign. For the sum of seven hundred dollars you will turn me over your property in Fog Bend."

Dobie jumped a foot in the air. "You dirty road agent. It's worth three times that m—"

"I could be a mean cuss and give you nothing for your signature," Jeeter said and grinned. "Couldn't I, boys?"

THE Bar 7 punchers laughed, and Dobie wondered what Winterling was conniving with Jeeter for, but only for a moment. The blood in his veins thickened to curds and whey. Hank himself rode out of the pines chuckling like a fox with feathers in its mouth. "Got four witnesses here, Dobie. I want you to promise me you'll court Millie and ask here to marry you within sixty days. Hate to do this but I am more desperate than Jeeter."

"I refuse," Dobie Pinkert yelled.

Hank Winterling said, "Jeeter, send one of your riders to get the sheriff."

Dobie looked for a way out but there did not seem to be any. It came to pass that he signed his land away and promised to sue for Millie's hand.

Hank's riders turned the calf loose and Hank said as they gave Dobie back his gun, "Expect you to call this coming Saturday night, Dobie."

When Dobie, slumped dejectedly in the saddle, started to prod his black into motion, Jeeter said, "Wait, I got something to tell you, Dobie, and it breaks my heart and brings tears to my eyes."

Dobie yanked the bronc's head up.

"Big feller came to Fog Bend the other night," Jeeter said. "Represents a railroad, Northern Pacific. Their tracks are coming this way, he told the judge. Seems Fog Bend could be the next terminal point. Real estate'll boom, Dobie. I guess that'll teach you not to match wits with Jeeter Repp and throw in with the sodbusters against him."

"You are a wicked man, Jeeter," Dobie said, full of misery. "You most likely have turned me into a killer gunman."

He rode away, aimlessly for a few minutes, then swung toward Lone Loon Creek. His stomach was tied in a knot and the chuck waiting at the Cross J was no longer a magnet. The frogs were beginning to croak when he rode into Ben Murchison's yard. There was a wagon in front of the shed half filled with farm tools, and his nerves began singing again.

Ben's basso profundo floated out of the shack. "Come in and set, Dobie."

The Murchisons were having supper. Dobie looked quickly around and saw three wooden boxes on the floor packed with cooking pans and chinaware. "Don't tell me you're getting out, Ben!"

"Yep. Jeeter Repp give me a sheriff's notice today. They're foreclosing, Dobie. Figure me and Ma'll go over into Montana and—"

"What do you owe him, Ben?"

"Close to two-hundred dollars. Only way I could scrape that up would be for me to find the real Aladdin's lamp, Dobie. Pull up a chair. Have some pork and beet greens."

The hog meat started the wheels in Dobie Pinkert's head spinning. "Ben," he said, "Part of your land, that triangular piece stops only about a mile from Fob Bend, don't it? And the wind almost seventy per cent of the time blows out of the southwest."

"Yes, both times, Dobie," the nester said. "I don't follow you very close though, boy."

Dobie mentally liquidated his assets. He had nearly two hundred dollars in the Fog Bend bank. He had seven hundred of Jeeter's dinero.

"Ben, I'm investing in you," he suddenly said, and pulled a roll of money out from inside his checkered shirt. "You pay what you owe to Jeeter, and—" Dobie leaned across the table and chattered like a magpie, shoving the currency toward the nester's plate.

Ma Murchison stood near the stove with her mouth open. Finally she started to snicker, and Ben Murchison grinned like a wolf that has bushwacked a fat lamb. "It is a deal, Dobie. You get half the profits. I'll have to hire a couple of Mexes somewhere who'll work cheap."

"I know one, Ben," Dobie said. "Old Miguel over by Poverty Flats. Tell him to bring his goats along." He kicked his chair back. "I'll help you all I can in my spare time. Now, I guess it'll be easy to put a cover on that high-boxed wagon you got, Ben. Lot of feed for pigs thrown away in town."

In Fog Bend, Jeeter Repp sat in his office, grinning at Ferd Krause, and visualizing the growth of the town when the railroad came in.

"I can see that cowpoke now, Ferd, sittin' on the Bar 7 porch with that gal of Hank's," Jeeter said. "You show me a homelier gal and I'll show you a six-legged broomtail horse. Feller can't brag to people that he's going to marry a gal and then not do it, Ferd. They pay in court for feelings hurt that bad. Dobie better be at the Bar 7."

It was Saturday night, and Dobie was at the Bar 7. He sat on a straw settee, using what little room Millie had left over.

"I always told papa you was just bashful, Dobie, and would get up enough spunk to come see me sooner or later," Millie said and moved closer to the cowpuncher, and Dobie heard the arm of the settee crackle as he was shoved against it. "How big a house you think we should build, Dobie?"

"Well, it should be big as a barn at least." Dobie sighed. "I mean—that is—" He got to his feet. "Let's go inside and play some phonograph records. Some of the punchers down at the bunkhouse are watching us, Millie."

He looked hopefully toward the Bar 7 gate. A half hour later, just as Millie crossed the living room and turned the wall lamp down, rescue came. Elbie Gurd, a Cross J puncher, knocked on the door and was admitted. Elbie removed his hat and bowed to Millie.

"Sorry, Dobie," he said. "But Wunch needs all the hands he can get tonight. The beef stampeded awhile ago and have to be rounded up and pushed back on the benches."

"Shucks!" Dobie said, and looked quite sorrowful at Millie. "Well, I'll see you next Saturday night," he said, and picked up his hat.

"The time will fly, Dobie," Millie said coyly.

A mile from the Bar 7, Elbie said, "Hand over the three dollars, Dobie."

"I never was happier paying that much money before," the cowpuncher said. "If you had forgot I would have hunted you down and killed you, Elbie."

FOG BEND got the scent of Dobie's operations gradually. Ben Murchison purchased all available pigs within five miles of the town. He brought little pigs from the Junction. Old Miguel Santos came to work for Ben and brought seventeen goats along. Came a night when people walking the streets of Fog Bend began to sniff at the air.

It was a warm night but many windows began to bang down. Jeeter Repp went to the window of his office and drew in some air that was not exactly scented with pine resin and sweet balsam. He slammed the window shut, went out into the street to find Ferd Krause and Tozer. He routed them out of the Silver Palace and sent them riding out to Lone Loon Creek.

The two toughs rode up to the new fence Murchison had thrown up and stared unbelievingly at hundreds of big

and little pigs that were oinking and grunting and rooting up the turf. A long trough held the remains of a porcine supper, good old fashioned swill carted from the neighboring town of New Eden.

"Damn!" Ferd Krause choked out and held onto his nose. "Over there, Tozer. A bunch of goats." And then he spotted Dobie Pinkert coming out of a long low rattletrap of a shed, and rode over to the yard. "You'll git drove out of this country!" he bellowed. "You can't bring all them pigs in here! There must be five hundred."

"Five hundred and six to be exact," Dobie said. "No law says you can't raise pigs, Ferd. And folks sure like their bacon, don't they?"

"But that smell!" Krause choked out. "It—"

"You can't make lemonade without cutting up lemons, Ferd. Or peel onions without hurting your eyes," Dobie said. "We expect another shipment at the Junction in a couple of days."

"Come on, Tozer," Ferd gulped. "I can't stand no more."

Two hours later, Dobie Pinkert, without bothering to change his clothes or take a bath in the creek, called on Millie Winterling, and the eau de cologne she wore fell far short of competing with Dobie's doubtful scent. In fact, the Bar 7 punchers came out of the bunkhouse and sniffed at the night air when Dobie was still half a mile from Winterling's gate.

Millie looked at Dobie's old levis and crumby cotton shirt, then clamped a hand to her nose. Then she tied into Dobie. "You have the colossal gall to call on a girl in them clothes, Dobie Pinkert? And smelling like a pig-pen!"

"I'm a pig farmer," Dobie said. "You must take me as I am, Millie, darling! You expected maybe striped pants and a frock coat?"

Millie lifted her voice and it carried half way to Fog Bend. "You git, Dobie Pinkert! Don't you 'darling' me, ever again. I wouldn't marry with you if you was the last legible male in the world. You get on that horse of yours and ride, you smelly jughead!"

"Well, I got witnesses who heard that," Dobie chuckled. "They will get subpoenas if I need them and if they lie they will get fined for perjury or something."

He got on his black bronc and rode fast out of the Bar 7, and was out through the gate just about fifty feet ahead of the buckshot that spewed from Hank Winterling's shotgun.

Ben Murchison arrived in Fog Bend at eleven o'clock in the morning on his swill wagon. A swarm of flies buzzed around it, and those folks who happened to be abroad tried to hold their breaths until the wagon passed by. The wind washed in from the southwest, bringing with it the smell of pork chops on the hoof, laced with the aroma of Miguel Santos' ovine flock.

The temperature was close to ninety in the shade of the old locusts in front of Grubb's blacksmith shop, but all windows were closed. Jeeter Repp staggered out of a frame building, the sweat streaming down his face, and headed for Judge Littlefield's office. He found the judge stripped to his big fat waist and fanning himself with his hat.

"We got to stop this, Judge!" Jeeter roared. "Folks are threatening to move out. Nobody'll ever move in! They can't eat and they can't sleep."

"Don't know," the judge said, shaking his head. "Folks have a right to raise livestock. Cattle smell, too, when you herd 'em together. Was a case over in Paradox few years back. Frizzel versus Elferdonk versus the people. Cattle was shipped from there and—"

"Well," Jeeter said, his ears shaking, "We got one way like always. We start shooting, Judge!"

"On your own head," Judge Littlefield snapped. "Get out, Repp!"

When the land shark left, the judge chuckled deep inside. He had a big fat hunch as to what was going on, and he approved of it.

"Shouldn't last too long," the judge

said and reached for a bottle of vanilla and breathed the smell of it in deep.

Dobie discovered that there was a drawback in just about everything. Calling on Nora that same night he read strong disapproval in her pretty eyes, even though he had soaked himself in the creek for three hours and had used up a nickel's worth of soap.

"A pig farmer!" Nora said stormily. "I have some pride, Dobie Pinkert, if you haven't!" She sniffed at the air and winced. "You stop calling on me!"

DOBIE looked mournful even though he saw signs of tears in Nora's eyes. He tipped his hat politely and left, wondering if the ends did justify the means. Riding down the street, he saw Ferd Krause and Tozer, coming out of Vernay's Hardware carrying familiar looking boxes—the kind rifle and shotgun shells came in.

He looked up at the window of Jeeter Repp's office and saw the land shark grinning out at him. Dobie put himself inside the man's scheming head. With the railroad coming in, a lot of folks would move to Fog Bend and build houses on that property he'd skinned Dobie of. Should be a profit of about five thousand, easy. No pigs are going to leave me holding the well known sack.

When Dobie reached the nester's piggery he called Ben into consultation. "That old wooden bridge over the creek, Ben," he said. "Kind of rickety as she is, huh? Water's deep there, too. I am betting a hundred dollars against a shirt button that we will see the first pig stampede in history if we don't use a saw on them cedar posts. They'll come over that bridge, Ben. Folks, like horses, are creatures of habit."

"Yeah," the sodbuster said, and knuckled the stubble on his chin. "Kind of a hottish night, Dobie. Don't mind getting a little wet."

An hour later, Dobie and Ben Murchison came into the shack looking like half-drowned muskrats, and Ma had some hot coffee ready.

"No fun sawin' wood under water," Dobie said and grinned. "A doughnut or two would go good with this coffee, Ma."

The darkness deepened. Dobie squatted near an old shed near the corner of the big pigpen with Murchison, and waited. An hour went by. Another half-hour, and Murchison said, "Guess they ain't coming, Dobie."

The puncher suddenly laid a hand on the nester's shoulder. "Ben, the frogs out there have stopped croaking. Somebody is out there."

A few moments later, they heard the sound of horses at a walk, the rattle of bit chains. The shapes of five riders loomed up beyond the creek. They stopped. A low medley of voices brushed in and over the farmyard, and then the riders came on. Horses' hoofs thudded against the loose planks of the old bridge, and Dobie held his breath.

Then it happened. There was a loud crackling sound and the bridge gave way in the middle. Horses whinnied and riders let out surprised and fearful yells. Dobie said, his voice thinned by a great loud splash, "Come on, Ben!"

Four men finally pulled themselves to the creek bank, and Dobie recognized the one that looked half-drowned. Ferd Krause was on his hands and knees coughing up muddy water. Ben turned up the wick of the lantern he carried and held it up. Tozer was covered with green slime and he had lost his hat. The pockets of his vest were filled with gooey mud. Not far away were two of Hank Winterling's riders. One had a boot off and was pouring water out of it. A frog sat on another puncher's shoulder and honked.

"You two rannies can go as soon as you want," Dobie said to the Bar 7 riders. "Keep the shotgun on Jeeter's catfish, Ben. You should have crossed that bridge before you come to it, as the saying goes, Ferd."

"What'll we do with these two?" Ben asked Dobie.

"Lock 'em in the tool shed," Dobie said.

"We will deliver them tomorrow. They have got to tell the judge how I got swindled out of my land, Ben."

It was another hot day in Fog Bend. At ten o'clock Ben Murchison's swill wagon lumbered into town, Dobie on the seat alongside the nester. Jeeter Repp, still wondering why Ferd Krause and Tozer hadn't returned, stood out in front of the Silver Palace gnawing at nails that were already down to the quick. He hopped across the street when the swill cart stopped in front of the sheriff's office.

Dobie jumped to the ground, and grinned at Jeeter as he came up. "Brought some swill to town instead of taking it out this time, you crook!" he said. "Climb up and unhinge the cover, Jeeter, and look for yourself."

Jeeter did. A head popped up when he lifted the heavy board cover. It was Ferd Krause's and his face was the color of a bullfrog's stomach.

"For the love of the Almighty, Jeeter, git us out of here." Ferd pleaded.

Jeeter Repp turned his face away, blinked, and slammed the cover down on Ferd's head.

"They're staying in there until they tell the sheriff how you and Hank framed me, Jeeter," Dobie said.

"W— We'll talk!" Tozer yelled, thrusting the cover of the swill wagon up. "We'll admit to anything, Pinkert!"

"Look, Dobie," Jeeter said desperately, "We can settle this without no court trouble. We can agree on a reasonable settlement, I'm sure. Ha. Let's go over to Judge Littlefield's office and—"

"Sure," Dobie said. "I ain't an unreasonable man. Come on, Ben." He turned toward the sheriff. "Lock those two sashay bags up until we git back."

"Glad to see you want to settle this legal and peaceful like," Judge Littlefield said a few minutes later, and put his feet up on his desk and touched a cigar off. "What're your terms, Dobie?"

"Jeeter still owes me thirteen hundred on the land swindle," Dobie said. "Two thousand dollars is the price on the piggery. Add that up and—"

Jeeter screeched his protest, and the judge held up an admonishing hand. "He can sue you for framing him as a cattle rustler, Jeeter," he said. "That's a mighty serious charge. You're the one over the barrel. Better make the deal."

The land shark's face drained from purple to blue, then to a flaming red. "It's robbery!" he squealed like one of Dobie's petulant pigs. "Well, I can make a good profit even at that, I guess. I mean—all right, I agree, Pinkert. Let's sign the papers."

THE news spread throughout Fog Bend like a brush fire and there was rejoicing. While most of the celebrating was going on in the Silver Palace, Dobie was at the haberdasher's fitting on a new pair of store pants, and a pair of nicely tooled boots. He bought himself a blue silk shirt with pearl buttons and a cream-colored Stetson, then set forth to see Nora.

She refused to open the front door for awhile, but after Dobie gave her a lightning fast explanation, she let him in. "Oh, you look wonderful, Dobie," she said. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"I would forgive you out loud if you shot me dead," the puncher said, and put his arms around her for the first time. Nora reciprocated with much more vim and vigor and planted a kiss right on Dobie's mouth.

The pig smell came with the southwest wind but to Dobie at the moment it was full of peppermint, pennyroyal, and lavender. Nora let go of him and said, "You will have to marry me now, Dobie."

"I'm scared," Dobie said. "When your pa hears about that, he'll throw the bank safe at me."

It was lunchtime and Dobie had forgotten. He suddenly heard the sound of boots coming up the hard-pan of the walk. He turned and saw Amos Greenleaf through the screen door, and he shoved Nora gently away from him and headed for a rear window.

"Pinkert!"

The banker's voice stopped Dobie dead and turned him around. The puncher saw a twinkle in the banker's eyes, a small grin above his goatee.

"Y-Yessir," Dobie managed to squeeze out. "I was just goin', sir. I—"

"Better put another plate on the table, Nora," Greenleaf said. He sat down in his Morris chair and started laughing. "Pretty cute, Dobie. You're too smart to be working for that old hairpin, Ira Wunch. Good business man like you." He looked at his daughter and winked. "Dobie, with the profit you made on that deal and a loan from my bank, I figure you could start off a ranch with maybe five hundred head. I ain't marrying my daughter to no two-bit saddle bum."

Dobie's mouth snapped open. A housefly buzzed in and tickled his palate and flew out again. Finally he managed to say something.

"If this is a dream and I wake up I will shoot myself, Mister Greenleaf." He looked at Nora and knew a man did not have to die to get to Heaven. "Je-e-e-ehosephat!"

"Sit," the banker said. "Good time as any to begin sampling her cooking, Dobie. And learning how to use a napkin and hold a fork like it ain't a fence-post."

The anti-climax was a rough one for Jeeter Repp. Nearly a week later, a half hour after the stage came in with the mail, Dobie rode out of Fog Bend. Dobie Pinkert met him a mile from town and he was sure puzzled at the rope Jeeter had hanging from his saddlehorn.

"You don't lasso pigs," Dobie grinned.

"You mind your blankety-blank business," Jeeter growled. "It is worth what I am going to do not to see your ugly face again."

"H-m-m-m," Dobie said and rode on.

An hour later three of Ira Wunch's riders brought Jeeter in. The land shark was dripping water, and a cattail stuck out from the collar of his shirt. A rope still dangled from his neck. Dobie came running out of the drug store.

"We just happened past Curlew's pond when we heard a loud splash," a puncher explained. "We fished Jeeter out in the nick of time. He had a rock as big as a nail keg hitched to that rope."

"A hell of a note," Jeeter groaned. "A man can't even drown himself around here."

Judge Littlefield sauntered up. "Maybe it was because of this special delivery letter come in on the stage," he said. He handed it to Dobie. The banker's prospective son-in-law opened it and read it aloud:

> Dear Judge. We are sorry to inform you, after preliminary surveys, that the cost of blasting through the foothills of the Dogtooth mountains necessitates a change in our plans. The tracks will be laid to New Eden.
>
> It is with regret—

Dobie folded the letter and handed it back to the judge. "Ain't there a stiff fine for dumping refuse into that pond?"

"Fifty dollars!" Judge Littlefield said. "You can pay it in the morning, Jeeter."

Dobie hurried off to see Nora. He almost felt sorry for Jeeter Repp.

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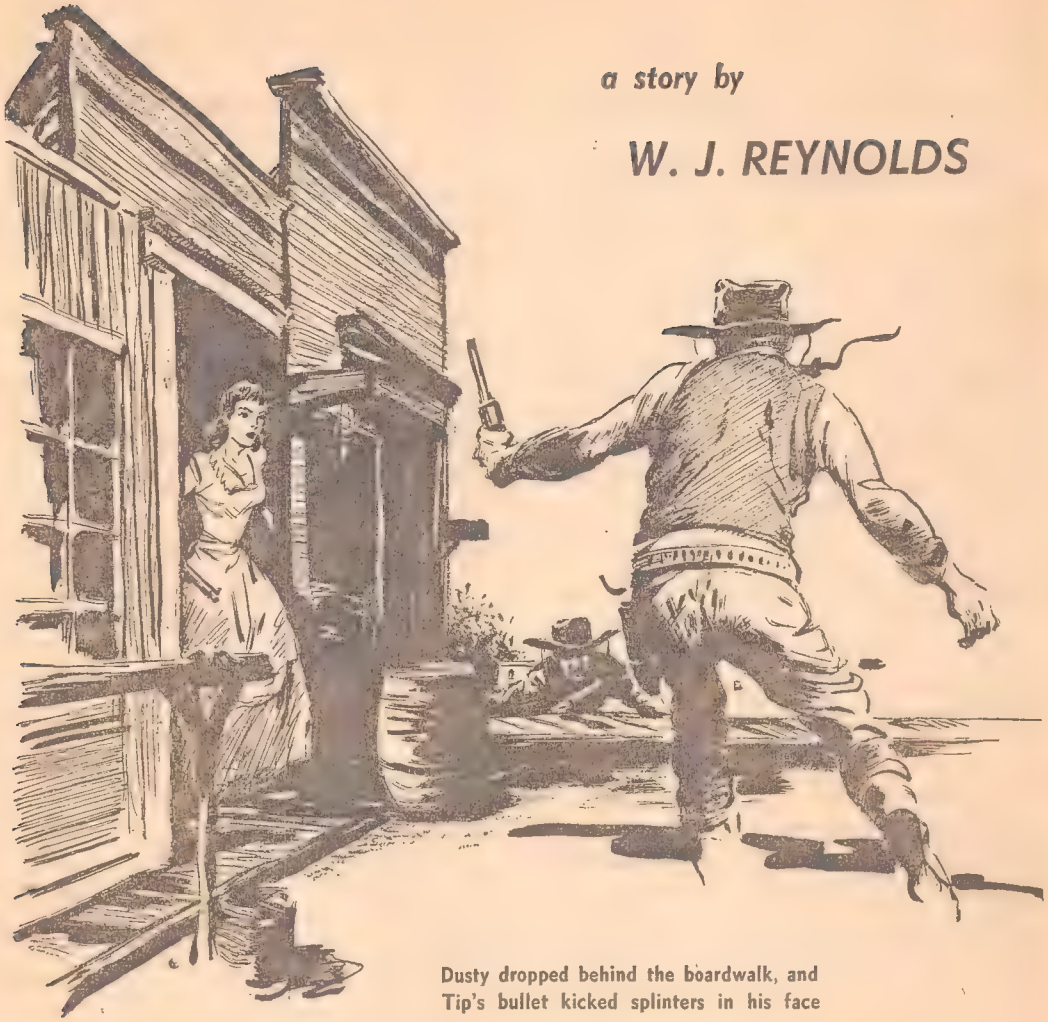

Dusty dropped behind the boardwalk, and Tip's bullet kicked splinters in his face

KILL OR BE KILLED

HE CAME riding into town from the east, a tall dusty rider on a salt crusted horse. The big sorrel wasn't lathered or beaten, just tired, and the marks were of long, slow miles. He passed the saloon and restaurant with only casual notice and turned into the wide maw of the livery barn. He personally saw that the sorrel had a short drink then rubbed the animal dry himself. With this done, he said to the attendent, "See that he has a good drink in half an hour then grain and hay." So saying, he shouldered his saddlebags and turned into the street toward the hotel.

Tip Scales had seen the stranger enter

The girl could see the bitter poison of vengeance that filled him

town from the bank window, and now as he left it with another foreclosure paper tucked under his cartridge laden belt, he saw the stranger coming into the street from the livery. Tip swerved a little to intercept the stranger, his huge Chihuahua spurs whizzing in the sand.

Tip enjoyed his association with banker Cameron, doing the little jobs that were best not made public, and he particularly enjoyed these foreclosure notices where he could swagger, slap his gunbutts and feel ten feet tall. Tip had ambitions. He wanted his reputation to rival and even surpass those of such gunfighters as John Wes Hardin, Earp and Hickock.

He was good with his guns and he had a trick which he practised assidously. Worn slightly higher, his left hand gun was his executioner while the lower right-hand one was a decoy. He was naturally lefthanded, a fact that he took care to keep to himself.

Now seeing this tall stranger with a pistol sagging his belt, and with a quiet appearance of efficiency, brought instant animosity. He slowed down as the stranger approached him and gave him a bold, brash stare.

The stranger gave him a casual glance, nodded courteously, and was past Tip, going steadily onward. Twice Tip opened his mouth to shout but each time he did not, and this only served to increase Tip's outrage. There was an angry flare in his eyes as he went in to saddle his horse.

"By God, he won't ignore me," he muttered once aloud.

He saw the stranger enter the hotel and mounting, he rode there and went inside with clanking spurs.

The stranger had entered the hotel, took the ink crusted pen proffered him by Hance Tupenny, and signed, "Dusty Clement, Clearwater, Texas," in a bold hand.

Tupenny said, "Long way from home, Mr. Clement. Hope you enjoy your stay in our town. Take room 27. Front left. Mike Putman serves a passable drink at the Boomer. Nan Clayborn puts out a good meal at the restaurant."

"Thanks," Dusty Clement said. "I'll try both places." He climbed the stairs and the sound of his boots ended in room 27.

Tip Scales strode up to the desk, spun the register and read the latest entry. His brash blue eyes lifted to Tupenny.

"A Texas gunslinger, huh? What does he want?"

"Didn't ask him," Tupenny said gently.

"I'll ask him," Tip said. "Right now!" He turned toward the stairs.

"Tip," Tupenny said, and the slapping sound of his voice stopped Tip and turned him around. "You won't ask him now, Tip. He's in my hotel."

Tupenny's stare was hard and with a lurking violence.

"Look here, Tupenny. Are you siding a Texas gunslinger against your own kind?"

"I ain't your kind, Tip," Tupenny said.

"You're going to push me too far someday, Tupenny," Tip blustered.

"I told you, Tip," Tupenny said. "No doubt Cameron has some dirty work to be done. Get to it."

Tip's face was red with his anger as he lunged out. His horse grunted under the striking spurs and went down the street at a tail switching run. Tupenny shoved the sawed off shotgun back under the desk.

Tip was going wild. Someone would have to kill him, Tupenny thought sadly, and he hoped it would not be him. He disliked carrying the town marshal's badge, but it wasn't a full time job, paying only occasional commissions, and was farmed out among the town's citizens.

Tupenny sighed. Tip was about to go over the line, like being in a sweat just now to jump a total stranger. He'd have a fine, sullen rage worked up by the time he got back into town. Maybe the stranger would be gone. He looked like a fine sort of fellow who minded his own business.

Tupenny sighed again, time for his before noon drink.

NAN CLAYBORN was twenty-five years old, a tall well-built woman with finely shaped bones and frank blue eyes. Her copper brown hair was damp from the morning cleanup of the restaurant after the breakfast rush and was loosely secured behind her neck with a silver clasp. She was a lovely girl who liked people and got along well with everyone. She liked men and was relaxed and smiling in their presence. She had had many proposals but being a woman with secret dreams, she had accepted none of them. She was aware of her liking for men and was pleased by it, and had been content to wait for the right one.

Lately, she had begun to have doubts about herself, wondering if there were some fault in her makeup. No man stirred her, no man aroused her as she felt she should be aroused to give her best. She would not settle for less. To the man she married she wanted to give all of which she felt she was capable. But lately she had begun to wonder with a growing desperateness, realizing that at twenty-five she was already an old maid in this western country.

"I can't offer less than is given me," she had told herself time and again.

She saw the stranger ride into town with a casual glance through the window, another dusty rider on a dusty horse. But several times in the next twenty minutes, she found herself paused, recalling that erect shape, the easy posture, and to her amazement, the clean slant of his jaw under the dust, the firm set of wide lips and the wide open eyes. She thought of this, then with her usual honesty, she stopped her preparation of the noon meal and walked to the door and leaned there looking toward the livery barn.

She saw Tip leave the bank and swagger toward the livery, and she saw his meeting with the stranger and the easy way the stranger avoided his belligerence. She watched the stranger come down the walk with a rising excitement.

He came abreast the restaurant's doorway and his eyes, gray and calm, looked into hers and the gray lost their casualness, became darker with sudden interest, then he was past, moving with saddle stiffened, mincing gait.

Nan Clayborn left the doorway and sat down on the stool by the cash box and took stock of her feelings. There was a strange weakness in her and her heart was beating hard and strong.

It's him, she thought, he's the one. The waiting has been well worth while.

Her hands shook a little as she lifted them to her hair in a completely feminine gesture. Why did it have to be a man she'd never seen? A man of whom she knew nothing? Maybe he was married. Maybe he was on the run. Maybe—It didn't matter. He was the one. . . .

Dusty Clement, in his room with saddlebags open and clean clothes laid out on the bed, decided that the basin of water wasn't enough to get the layer of dust off him. He took the clothes and left the hotel and crossed to the barber shop. He had his hair trimmed, was shaved and then soaked in the zinc tub. Afterwards, he was hungry and with the noon rush beginning to slack off, he crossed the street again toward the restaurant. He remembered, with mounting pleasure, the woman who had impressed him so powerfully when he had come past there.

Then remembering the reason why he was here, he forced thoughts of the woman out of his mind. He entered the restaurant.

There were three tables along one wall, and a dozen stools ranged the counter opposite. Four men were at one table, a single man at the front one. Three still on the stools.

Dusty recognized Carew at once. He sat at the front table, his meal finished but for a generous wedge of cake on which he was about to begin. He had grown a vandyke and the mustache would have done credit to the crankiest Frenchman.

Dusty Clements noted the three squares of mirrors on the wall behind the counter and selected a stool with this in mind.

Nan Clyborn took his order for the regular dinner and again their eyes met with a flaring of interest. Then Dusty was looking past her into the mirror, his eyes becoming blank with a set stare.

Carew, at the sound of Dusty's voice had looked up, his stare meeting the other in the mirror. Carew had severed a bite of the cake preparatory to lifting it to his mouth. Now he let it back to his plate and for a long half minute their gaze locked. Dusty's face was blank, his eyes still and unmoving, unwinking. Carew's face became agitated, a furious hate mingled with fear. His gaze dropped to his plate.

Dusty Clements continued to stare, knowing that Carew would look again in a moment. He remembered his brother Joe's angry words when they were kids and again many times afterwards, "Don't stare at me like that! Them blame eyes give me the jimjams!"

Dusty's eyes had a starburst of brownish flecks around the irises, not unpleasant except when accompanied with a blank, deadpan expression. With a kid's glee, Dusty had tried it on others after Joe's continued harping about it. This had gotten Dusty a lot of fights as well as a lot of laughs.

Now Carew stood up abruptly, hurriedly laid some silver on the table and went out, crossing the street to the bank and went in with a darting look at the restaurant.

The byplay had not gone unnoticed and Dusty, as he ate slowly and with a hungry man's relish, was aware of the secret study of the restaurant's customers, and the unusual attention of the woman's frank blue eyes.

THE others finished and left and when Dusty had eaten, he said, "I'd sure like a chunk of that cake. Like the gentleman at the front table left."

"It goes with the meal," she said. When she brought the cake, she lingered. "Do you know Mr. Cameron?"

"Cameron? Oh. Well, he does look familiar." He took a bite of the cake, chewed thoughtfully and closed his eyes briefly with a greatly pleased expression. "Miss Clayborn, did you bake that cake yourself?"

She smiled. "Yes. I'm a good cook."

"Are you married?" His eyes were full of laughter.

Her color ran high and there was an unusual weakness in her. "No. Are you proposing?"

He chuckled. "I'm a cautious man, Miss Clayborn. Can I still be eligible if I wait a day or two and see if this food don't slack off none?"

"All right." She was still smiling. "It's only fair to warn you though, that Mr. Cameron has asked me too! He owns a bank."

His expression grew thoughtful. "The salty kid with the two guns, does he work for Cameron?"

"Tip Scales? Yes." She was faintly worried now as she looked at him steadily. "I saw Tip meet you. He's a little wild. Tip likes guns, and he's good with them. Too good."

"I think he came into the hotel behind me."

"Yes. Tupenny, the man at the hotel, doesn't like Tip much. He probably kept Tip from following you upstairs. Tupenny is the town marshal."

"I'll try to get along with Tip. I'm a peaceable man." He got up and paid for his meal and gave her a warm smile. "I'll be back, ma'am."

He went out and Nan Clayborn stood watching him, not moving until he was lost to her sight. Then she turned and looked at herself in the mirror, and her eyes were wholly soft and dreamy.

It's him, she thought, and he's come here after Cameron. Yet he looks like a man who loves to laugh with his friends.

She went slowly back to the kitchen where Mrs. Wayford was busily rattling pans and dishes, and she didn't even see the interested glance of her helper. Why did it have to be a stranger, she thought again, a man with vengeance in him. He

is after Cameron. But Cameron is a coward and he knows it. The banker won't meet him in a fight and this stranger won't shoot him unarmed. All he could do was pressure the banker with his presence, spook him into running again and again. How many times had he done this already?

Another thought made her still. Cameron wouldn't fight. But Tip would. Tip was the banker's man and that, she thought with conviction, is how Cameron will work it.

This stranger was a stubborn man, and would not quit a thing once begun. But he could change his mind. She would make him change it. She owed herself this chance.

"I've waited a long time," she told herself. "This is the last time he will have to chase Cameron, even if I have to meddle a little. I can change his mind or I'm not the woman I think I am." She resumed her activities with confidence.

Dusty Clements walked toward the hotel, thinking of Nan Clayborn, and curiously disturbed. She was a fine woman and would make some man happy. He had no way of knowing why, in a country full of men, that she had not married. She had said that Cameron had proposed. The thought disturbed him, and as he paused to light a cheroot, he puffed with a vigor that soon wreathed his head in smoke. He walked on with a hard, jarring step.

Several men had been lounging on the hotel's porch but now they were breaking up, going back to their businesses and jobs. Dusty chose a wicker chair and dragged it down the deserted porch to the east end and settled himself comfortably. He had a full view of the bank from this position.

He had been there an hour when the sound of steps came down the hotel's stairs and Tupenny came out to take a chair nearby. His face and eyes were still puffed with sleep. "Have to have my nap," he said. "Hell of a habit in this heat. I'm cranky if I do and cranky if I don't. So I do."

Dusty said, "A man can pick up a habit and find it hard to break." Tupenny would get around to his business shortly. Already the word would be about town of the way Cameron had spooked, and Tupenny, ordinarily not a prying man, would have his say because he was the town's marshal.

At Dusty's half smiling glance, Tupenny grinned wryly. "My job, Dusty."

Dusty nodded. "Not very complicated. Cameron, or Carew, hired someone to kill my brother Joe, back in Texas. He never wears a gun. He's never found it necessary."

"Too many Tip Scales."

"Yes. He's used Tip's kind before. He had a son who could wear Tip's boots very comfortably."

"I usually keep the peace by giving troubleseekers a floater. Sometimes it's hard on my hotel business. I'd have given Tip one, but I waited because he's lived here for years. Then Cameron is on the town council. He wanted me to make an issue of it, resign, then he'd get the job for Tip."

"That would be something. My man is not likely to fight me. I've wondered some lately why I keep scaring him, and don't let him have it or go home."

"He loses money every time, huh?"

"Yes. That hurts him nearly as badly as being killed."

Tupenny got up. "I'll speak to Tip when he gets back." He went back into the hotel.

AT THREE o'clock, Dusty rose and went to the livery where he curried and brushed the sorrel. Then he hunkered in the shade of the corral, watching the bank. When the teller left at four, Dusty rose and went to lean against a porch column midway between the restaurant and hotel.

When, at five o'clock, Carew still had not left the bank, Dusty strolled to the restaurant and went inside. He didn't take a seat, but hurried on through the

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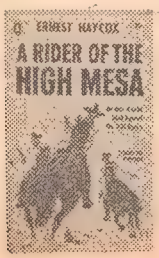

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kitchen where a sweating, severe looking woman gave him an outraged glare as he went out the back door. Dusty passed down the back alley to the hotel's rear, went in, and passed on to the lobby to lean near the swung back front door.

Hance Tupenny gave him a bland look which held no animosity then resumed his fiddling with the inky pen. Carew came hurrying in and was almost across the lobby when Dusty Clements said, "Carew!" hard and short.

Carew jumped then froze, but for his hands which shot over his head. "I'm not armed, Clements! I'm not armed! Don't shoot!"

He shot a glance over his shoulder, his face sagging with dread. When he saw Dusty standing there, arms folded, he licked his lips then suddenly ran up the stairs.

"Tupenny," Dusty said gently, "did it ever occur to you just what special kind of hell it must be for a mean hearted, big ideaed man to have no guts? No? Well, guess I'll go get me some food. That Nan Clayborn is a fine cook."

Tupenny watched the tall man leave then he looked up the stairs with a disgusted expression. He looked back at the pen he rolled in his fingers, his expression thoughtful, then pleased. "Yeah, Dusty, she's a good cook."

In the restaurant, Nan Clayborn took Dusty's order with no comment, but when she came to set his place, she said, "He fell for it, didn't he?"

His expression was sober. "It's a sad thing, Nan. He was scared blue." He looked at her, suddenly startled. "Did you give his proposal serious consideration?"

"No." He looked so relieved that his expression was comical and she laughed outright. His face turned red, his grin sheepish. She said, "I surely hope you're pleased with the food tonight!" It pleased her immensely that he was blushing like a schoolboy.

She was slow bringing his food, but he waited patiently, suspecting that she had more to say. The restaurant was nearly empty when he got to his pie and coffee.

She paused in front of him. "What's to keep him from ignoring you?"

He was thoughtful for a moment. "You must know something of him. He's greedy and snake mean in a sneaky way, yet he must be respected. He hides his meanness from himself and it doesn't occur to him that others know him for what he is. He must have a front."

A half dozen cowboys came trooping in and she left him to wait on them. Dusty finished his meal and went back to the hotel.

Carew missed his supper, and he didn't appear for breakfast. Dusty waited until nine and when Carew gave no indication of leaving his room, Dusty knocked on the door.

"Who is it?"

"Clements."

"Get out! Get away from that door, Clements! Get away!"

"Just want you to know I'm still here. You hungry?"

"Get out! Leave me alone!"

Dusty met Tupenny starting up the stairs. "Just reporting in to Carew," Dusty said. "He seemed upset."

He went to the restaurant. It was empty but for Nan Clayborn and the severe faced woman. "Too late for breakfast?"

"No. Thought you might have tired of my cooking."

He grinned at her. "Like it better every day. I was waiting for an acquaintance but he didn't seem hungry."

Nan sobered. "Dusty, is it worth it? A man like you should have too many things to do to spend his time chasing someone—to no end." Her eyes darkened. "Why don't you just shoot him and get it over?"

"Without a gun?"

"Then why keep it up?" she asked.

"A sense of duty, I guess."

She gave him a straight look, wholly serious. "Dusty, you're a man who likes people, and people like you. You enjoy your friends. Did you ever think what

this is doing to you? What will you be like in another year? Or two? This becomes an obsession, and somewhere along the line you go sour, something snaps your control or principles, and boom—you shoot him down. What then, Dusty?"

His brown face was still, somber as he fiddled with a fork. She said, "He could sic another gunman onto you, and if you're lucky, you'll be killed. If not, you'll kill, and again the next time. Soon you're a killer yourself, Dusty, and then you'll shoot Cameron down. You'll be a gunman, a mark for any man, for the Tip Scales' with ambitions of their own."

THERE was a strange tautness in Dusty Clements, her words were striking him like physical blows, repeating things that he himself had thought, and suddenly he felt an urgency to explain to this woman, have her understand what he needed to do.

"I've a sister-in-law back in Texas, Nan. She supports three kids by cooking for a ranch crew. She won't accept my help except when she's in real need. Her husband is dead because Carew hired him killed."

"Carew? Oh, Cameron!"

"Yes. Carew had a son, like Tip Scales, a gun crazy kid. He was already doing his dad's dirty work as Tip is now. He got in a fuss with Joe, and Joe slapped him down. He called Joe out, and even then Joe avoided it. Then the kid started bothering Joe's family. Joe shot it out with him, and killed him. Carew couldn't stand it, and he put a thousand dollars on Joe's head. Dead."

"On his own?"

"Yes. Crossing the Red, a man named Aiken drowned Joe. Joe was nearly caught in a mill, but got clear, nearly drowned. Aiken was hauling him in. We didn't know Aiken drowned him until later. One of the men saw him but didn't think about it till later, didn't think of him drowning Joe, that is. We buried Joe and went on. Aiken quit that same

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day, claiming he'd hurt his back. When we came back down the trail, Joe had been dug up."

"Oh, no !"

He nodded. "Aiken had dug him up, lit out with him and collected his thousand dollars from Carew."

"And then you went after Carew?" There was dread in her voice. "And Aiken?"

"He was killed in a saloon brawl before we got home. Carew sold out and left when he heard I was coming for him. I called him out in Abilene, Texas, after I found him. He ran. I found him in New Mexico. He had a hired man who tried to put a knife in me in bed. I killed him. Carew ran. I found him here."

"And now he has another hired man. A gun crazy kid."

Dusty's face was lined and weary, but with a hint of wildness flaring in his eyes. "Yes."

There were tears in Nan's eyes but no defense, no pretense, her feelings were there for him to see as he looked up at her. He looked at her a long time, his face changing to a startled wonder and great pleasure before it was again lined, somber. He looked down at his clinched fists on the counter.

"Nan. Nan, I wouldn't have had this happen for your sake. You're a fine woman, all any man could want. You'll find another one more worthy."

"I could have had others," she said. She shook her head. "No, Dusty, not another."

He lifted his hands to her shoulders and then they fell away. "This—I'll have to think about it, Nan. I'm sort of confused. I'll need some time to get it straight in my mind."

"Take time, Dusty. And when you decide come back, even if it's to say goodbye. Will you do that, Dusty?"

"Yes, Nan, I'll do that."

He walked toward the hotel, his steps slow, uncertainty aroused pressure inside him. Nan Clayborn is all the woman a man could want, he thought, she's all I want now. Why do I need to think of it? Why keep hounding Carew? Either I shoot him down and become a murderer or it will be as Nan said, as I have thought myself. I come closer each time to killing him. It's working on me and I have to stop some place.

He was almost to the hotel before he became aware of the sweating horse at the tierail, and even as he looked at it, Tip Scales came out of the hotel and stood at the top of the steps, a rank grin on his face.

Dusty Clements moved on, his pause barely obvious, and all of his attention was on Tip now. Tip was ready for him, and looking at the arrogant, high shape of the gunman, Dusty knew a full hearted bitterness.

They would never learn, these gun crazy kids, and there was always another one to replace one dead. It was kill or be killed, and Carew was one step nearer to a bullet.

Tip spread his legs, grinning down at Dusty as he approached the steps. He had been up to report to his boss and Carew had egged him on to gun Dusty down. There was no getting around it, unless he could get the drop.

Dusty had been in the hearing of a gunfighter in Abeline once, and heard that man say with deep conviction, "Never try nothing fancy in a gunfight. Show no mercy or the man will live to kill you—maybe in the back. Kill him before he can kill you."

Tip Scales said, "'I hear you been ragging my boss, Clements, is that right?"

"Not enough," Dusty said, and started on up the steps.

"Hold on!"

Dusty stopped.

Tip rushed on, an eager flame in his eyes, "Are you a fourflusher, Texas man? What's wrong, Texas man? Your guts green now you face a real man?"

The rashness was upon Tip like a banner to be seen and heard. He would force the fight, he would have his man for breakfast.

"Never mind, kid," Dusty said. "Go grow up someplace." He started on past Tip.

Tip Scales stiffened, amazed outrage slacking his face. Then he reached for Dusty's shoulder to spin him about, a wild shout bursting from him. But his hand didn't connect. Dusty half turned, his left hand slapping Tip's arm on and his own right hand lifted his pistol and struck a slashing blow. The long barrel hit Tip's arm midway of wrist and elbow and the snap of the bone was a distinct sound.

TIP SCALES cried brokenly, grabbing his broken arm with his left hand, and Dusty Clements whirled him around and kicked him into the street. Then he turned and entered the hotel as men watched in strained silence.

He saw Tupenny leaping down the stairs. "What happened?" he asked Dusty.

"Tip braced me. I broke his arm and kicked him into the street. It was the best I could do, Tupenny."

Tupenny cursed. "I told him to stay away from you, then Carew sent for me. Damn him, he'd already egged Tip on to it, and pulled me out of the way!"

"I guess so," Dusty said.

"You ought to have shot him, Dusty. Save me the job, and he might get you in the back next time."

"I'll be gone then," Dusty said. "Tomorrow." He went up the stairs to his room.

Tupenny stood looking after him, the

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anger fading from his eyes. It's the girl, Tupenny thought, she's working on him, and I hope to God she does it.

Dusty lay down across his bed and stared at the rough plank ceiling. It's working on me, he thought, and it's closer than I knew. I was mad enough to kill Carew just now for siccing that fool kid on me. I would have shot him if he'd been in sight. This can't go on.

He got up then, and went to Carew's door and knocked. "Carew? Listen, Carew." There was no answer but there was the sound of a furtive movement. Dusty said, "It's over, Carew. I'd have shot you down like a dog ten minutes ago, gun or no gun. But not now—I'm leaving, Carew. Tomorrow morning, early. You're free. I won't bother you again." He went back to his room and lay down thinking of Nan.

I'm tired, he thought, I'm too old at twenty-seven for this kind of thing. I'm an old man, and I'll have to learn to laugh again and have fun. Nan can help me do that, we can have a good life together. So thinking, he slept with a relaxation he had not known in years.

Dusty awoke with the low sun shining on him through the west window, and he sat up with a bouyant, free feeling, and it was a moment before he knew what caused it. Then he grinned widely and went to wash his hands and face in the graniteware basin on the commode.

"I guess," he told his grinning reflection as he combed his hair, "that I'll go eat and ask my girl for a date!" He winked. "And see when she'll be ready to light out for Texas."

The old swamper was lounging behind the desk, and he gave Dusty a wide eyed solemn look instead of his usual grin. Dusty said, "Cheer up, oldtimer, I'll invite you to the wedding. Hance too."

The old man shook his head. "I'd like that, Dusty. Looks like you and Hance is easy and mighty trusting for grown folks!"

Dusty stopped at the serious tone. "What's up? Where's Hance?"

"Went out of town on some business. Said this would be a good time while you was being peaceful and Tip was crippled."

"I agree. I'm heading for Texas tomorrow. Early."

"Maybe. Take a look outside. But first listen. Cameron went to the bank couple hours ago. Tip went not long after, when the doc finished with his arm. In case you don't know it, and I reckon you don't, Tip is left handed, and he's crazy mad about the way you handled him. Killing you is the only thing will salve his pride. And you know how Cameron feels. I'd watch sharp if I was you, Dusty Clements!"

"Thanks, oldtimer, I'll do that."

As he stepped out on the porch, he knew at once what the old man had meant. The town was alert. It was in the deserted street and the way men and women lurked just inside doorways and windows. He muttered another thanks to the old man. With his head in the clouds, thinking it was over, he might not have noticed until too late.

He had almost slipped fatally this time, he who should know Carew best.

Tension crawled into Dusty but he forced himself to relax. Carew had spooked sure enough with Dusty's notice of leaving. He was very probably convinced that Dusty was going to kill him on sight. The fool! The scared damn fool!

Carew had probably worked on Tip until the kid was crazy mad. But he was still dangerous, doubly so in his state of mind. And his shooting arm was still intact. He was left handed so the oldtimer had said.

Maybe it was too late yet, maybe Carew would come to his senses. But in his heart Dusty knew better.

He started up the street toward the restaurant.

He was halfway there when Nan Clayborn screamed, "Go back, Dusty. Go back!"

With a high shout, Tip Scales leaped from behind the restaurant's corner, his gun lifted. Dusty sprawled into the street, using the foot high board walk as partial

cover, and Tip's bullet kicked splinters in his face and another made a close sound past his head. Dusty used the board walk for a steadying rest and fired twice and saw Tip sprawl loosely.

A gun made shattering echos from the restaurant's doorway and glass jangled from the bank, and Carew's bullet missed Dusty safely. Dusty came to one knee, seeing Carew in the bank's doorway, levering the rifle and fired frantically.

Dusty shot him, using the remaining three bullets in his pistol, and saw the banker drape head down on the bank's steps.

The bursting violence had stunned him a little, and he rose numbly to his feet and was still standing like that when Nan reached him, the dragoon revolver with which she had fired at Carew, still in her hand. All around, people were rushing into the street, calling excitedly.

Nan's composure had deserted her until she was certain that Dusty was unhurt, then her eyes searched his face. "I would not have interfered except to call to you," she said, "but he was about to shoot you in the back."

His eyes were still dazed. "What?"

"Carew was about to shoot you in the back. I fired to frighten him. Maybe I did shoot at him, but—"

He was looking at her, his eyes tender. "I'm proud of you, Nan. Proud, and I love you."

"Then everything is all right," she said.

"Yes, everything is all right now," he said and held her tightly.

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SAGEBRUSH SAVVY

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Can a porcupine throw its quills?—Joe McQ. (Ind).

A.—In a recent magazine article naturalist Dr. William J. Long says they can. From my own many years of experience with Western porcupines, I would say that in striking at an enemy with its tail, the porky often jars loose large tail quills with enough force to fly through the air several feet, but this happens only when the tail strikes something. Therefore the quills are not actually thrown, in the strict sense of the word. The yellow-haired Western porcupine is on the increase in the Southwest, not only in timbered conutry but even out on the West Texas plains. Some attribute this increase to the wholesale destruction of coyotes, which are believed to kill a good many young porkies. Ranchmen hate the spiny critters, not only because they damage tres, but because overcurious colts, calves and dogs often get quills in their noses, sometimes dying from them if not pulled out promptly. Personally, I always kill a porky when I can.

Q.—I am often confused by writers describing the colors of horses with such words as grullo, bayo coyote, mojino, rocillo, azulejo, etc. Why can't they tell the readers a horse's color in plain English?—Abbie J. (Fla.).

A.—Maybe that would be better for many readers, but the southwestern cowboy borrowed these terms from the Mexican *vaquero* so long ago that they have actually become a part of "cowboy language." To the cowboy, some of them designate a horse color more briefly and accurately than a description in English words. As for the meanings of those you mention: *Grullo* (GROOL-yo) means the color of a sandhill crane, approximately a dark mouse-color. A *bayo coyote* (BY-yo co-YOH-tay) is a rather dark dun or buckskin horse with black mane and tail and a black back-stripe. *Mojino* (mo-HEE-no) is a particular shade of almost black brown. *Rocillo* (ro-SEEL-yo) means roan in general, but *azulejo* (ah-zoo-LAY-ho) is a special shade of dark blue roan. Incidentally, in Mexico blue tile is called *azulejo*.

Q.—What did oldtime cowboys mean by a hot rope?—F.X.R. (N.J.).

A.—Not a rustler's rope nor an extra skillful roper, as you might suppose, but simply a rope that slips through a cowboy's hands fast enough to friction-burn the flesh—which doesn't have to be very fast.

Q.—Where does the Western artist, Peter Hurd, live?—R.D. (Canada.)

A.—At San Patricio, New Mexico, U.S.A.

Q.—What is the difference between a canyon and an arroyo?—N.A.F. (Ga.).

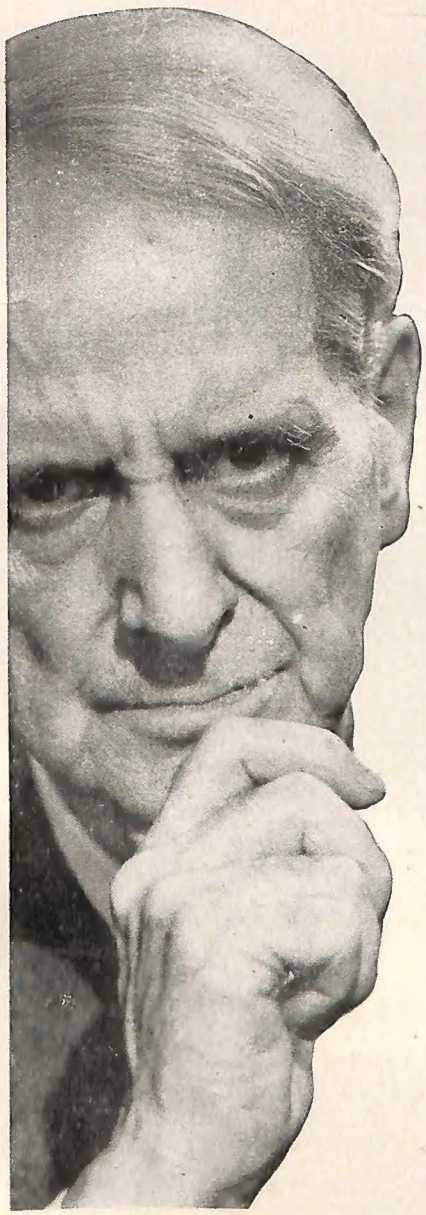
A.—A canyon is deeper and bigger. On first seeing the Grand Canyon in Arizona, a four-year-old exclaimed: "Golly, that sure is some arroyo!"

Q.—Is there any cure for loco weed poisoning?—P.W.J. (Ark.).

A.—Not that I know of. Horses only slightly "locoed" sometimes get over it by being kept off of the weed.

S. Omar Barker

To The Man With
HERNIA
Who Can Not Submit to Surgery



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